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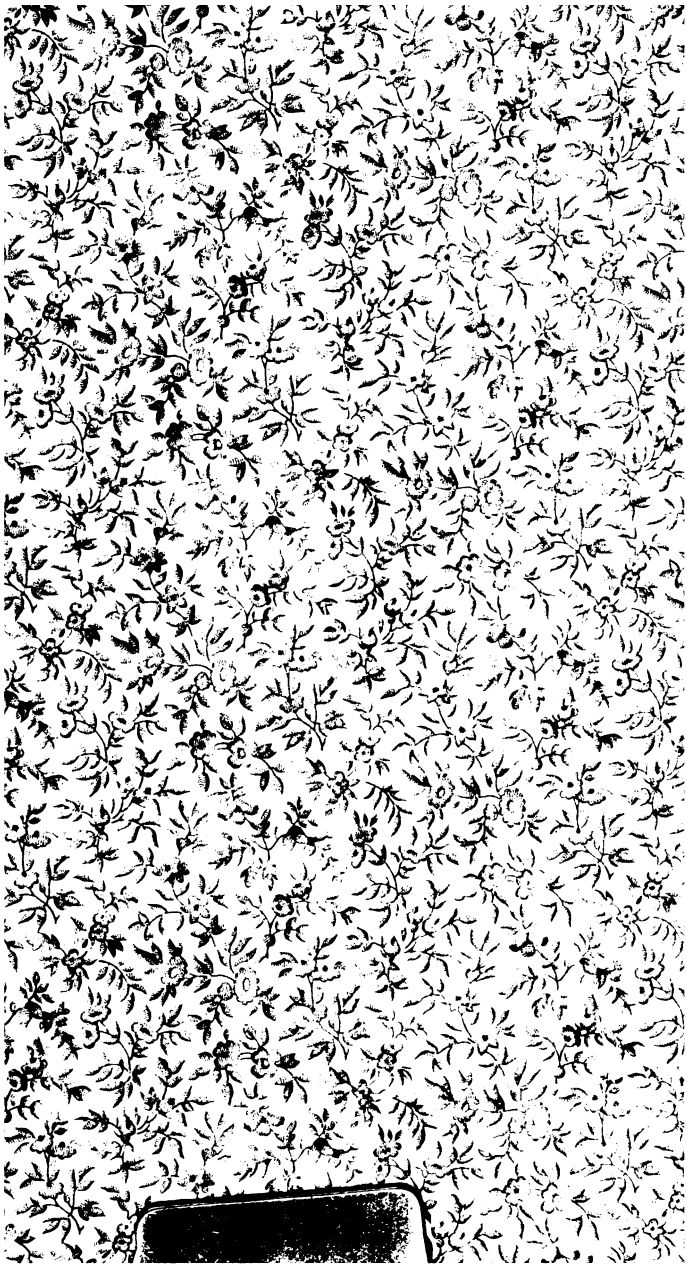

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UNDER FALSE PRETENCES

A NOVEL

BY

ADELINE SERGEANT

AUTHOR OF "JACOBI'S WIFE," "BEYOND RECALL," "AN OPEN FOE," ETC.

NEW YORK
FRANK F. LOVELL & COMPANY
142 AND 144 WORTH STREET

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER.		PAGE.
I.	PROLOGUE	5
II.	BY THE LOCH	14
III.	HUGO LUTTRELL	22
IV.	IN THE TWILIGHT	30
V.	THE DEAD MAN'S TESTIMONY	38
VI.	MOTHER AND SON	46
VII.	A FAREWELL	54
VIII.	IN GOWER-STREET	63
IX.	ELIZABETH'S WOOING	70
X.	BROTHER DINO	79
XI.	ON A MOUNTAIN-SIDE	87
XII.	THE HEIRESS OF STRATHLECKIE	95
XIII.	SAN STEFANO	104
XIV.	THE PRIOR'S OPINION	112
XV.	THE VILLA VENTURI	121
XVI.	"WITHOUT A REFERENCE"	129
XVII.	PERCIVAL'S HOLIDAY	137
XVIII.	THE MISTRESS OF NETHERGLEN	145
XIX.	A LOST LETTER	154
XX.	"MISCHIEF, THOU ART AFOOT."	162
XXI.	A FLASK OF ITALIAN WINE	170
XXII.	BRIAN'S WELCOME	179
XXIII.	THE WISHING WELL	187
XXIV.	"GOOD-BYE"	196
XXV.	A COVENANT	203
XXVI.	ELIZABETH'S CONFESSION	212
XXVII.	PERCIVAL'S OWN WAY	220
XXVIII.	A REVELATION	228
XXIX.	DINO'S PROPOSITION	236
XXX.	FRIENDS AND BROTHERS	245
XXXI.	ACCUSER AND ACCUSED	253
XXXII.	RETRIBUTION	261
XXXIII.	WHAT PERCIVAL KNEW	269
XXXIV.	PERCIVAL'S ATONEMENT	277

CHAPTER.		PAGE.
XXXV.	—DINO'S HOME-COMING	286
XXXVI.	—BY LAND AND SEA	295
XXXVII.	—WRECKED	303
XXXVIII.	—ON THE ROCAS REEF	311
XXXIX.	—BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH	319
XL.	—KITTY	327
XLI.	—KITTY'S FRIENDS	335
XLII.	—A FALSE ALARM	342
XLIII.	—TRAPPED	350
XLIV.	—HUGO'S VICTORY	357
XLV.	—TOO LATE	365
XLVI.	—A MERE CHANCE	372
XLVII.	—FOUND	380
XLVIII.	—ANGELA	387
XLIX.	—KITTY'S WARNING	398
L.	—MRS. LUTTRELL'S ROOM	406
LI.	—A LAST CONFESSION	414
LII.	—"THE END CROWNS ALL, AND THAT IS YET TO COME"	422

UNDER FALSE PRETENCES.

CHAPTER I.

Prologue to the Story.

In Two Parts.

I.

It was in the year 1854 that an English gentleman named Edward Luttrell took up his abode in a white-walled, green-shuttered villa on the slopes of the western Apennines. He was accompanied by his wife (a Scotchwoman and an heiress), his son (a fine, little fellow, five years old), and a couple of English servants. The party had been travelling in Italy for some months, and it was the heat of the approaching summer, as well as the delicate state of health in which Mrs. Luttrell found herself, that induced Mr. Luttrell to seek out some pleasant house amongst the hills where his wife and child might enjoy cool breezes and perfect repose. For he had lately had reason to be seriously concerned about Mrs. Luttrell's health.

The husband and wife were as unlike each other as they well could be. Edward Luttrell was a broad-shouldered, genial, hearty man, warmly affectionate, hasty in word, generous in deed. Mrs. Luttrell was a woman of peculiarly cold manners; but she was capable, as many members of her household knew, of violent fits of temper and also of implacable resentment. She was not an easy woman to get on with, and if her husband had not been a man of very sweet and pliable nature, he might not have lived with her on such peaceful terms as was generally the case. She had inherited a great Scotch estate from her father, and Edward Luttrell was almost entirely depen-

dent upon her ; but it was not a dependence which seemed to gall him in the very least. Perhaps he would have been unreasonable if it had done so; for his wife, in spite of all her faults, was tenderly attached to him, and never loved him better than when he asserted his authority over her and her possessions.

Mr. and Mrs. Luttrell had not been at their pretty white villa for more than two months when a second son was born to them. He was baptized almost immediately by an English clergyman then passing through the place, and received the name of Brian. He was a delicate-looking baby, but seemed likely to live and do well. Mrs. Luttrell's recovery was unusually rapid; the soft Italian air suited her constitution, and she declared her intention of nursing the child herself.

Edward Luttrell was in high spirits. He had been decidedly nervous before the event took place, but now that it was safely over he was like a boy in his joyous sense of security. He romped with his little son, he talked *patois* with the inhabitants of the neighbouring village of San Stefano, he gossiped with the monks of the Benedictine foundation, whose settlement occupied a delightful site on the hillside, and no premonition of coming evil disturbed his heart. He thought himself the most fortunate of men. He adored his wife; he worshipped the baby. His whole heart was bound up in his handsome little Dick, who, at five years old, was as nearly the image of his father as a child could be. What had he left to wish for?

There had been a good deal of fever at San Stefano throughout the summer. When the little Brian was barely six weeks old, it became only too evident that Mrs. Luttrell was sickening of some illness—probably the same fever that had caused so much mortality in the village. The baby was hastily taken away from her, and a nurse provided. This nurse was a healthy young woman with very thick, black eyebrows and a bright colour; handsome, perhaps, but not prepossessing. She was the wife of a gardener employed at the villa, and had been recommended by one of the Fathers at the monastery—a certain Padre Cristoforo, who seemed to know the history of every man, woman and child in San Stefano. She was the mother of twins, but this was a fact which the Luttrells did not know.

This woman, Vincenza Vasari by name, was at first domiciled in the villa itself with her charge; but as more dangerous symptoms declared themselves in Mrs. Luttrell's case, it was thought better that she should take the baby to her own home, which was a fairly clean and respectable cottage close to the gates of the villa. Here Mr. Luttrell could visit the child from time to time; but as his wife's illness became more serious he

saw less and less of the baby, and left it more than ever to Vincenza's care.

Vincenza's own children were with their grandmother at a hamlet three miles from San Stefano. The grandmother, generally known as old Assunta, used to bring one or another of them sometimes to see Vincenza. Perhaps they took the infection of fever in the course of these visits; at any rate one of them was soon reported to be seriously ill, and Vincenza was cautioned against taking the Luttrells' baby into the village. It was the little Lippo Vasari who was ill; his twin-brother Dino was reported perfectly well.

Some days afterwards Mr. Luttrell, on calling at the cottage as usual, noticed that Vincenza's eyes were red, and her manner odd and abrupt. Old Assunta was there, with the baby upon her knee. Mr. Luttrell asked what was the matter. Vincenza turned away and burst into tears.

"She has lost her baby, signor," the old woman explained. "The little one died last night at the village, and Vincenza could not see it. The doctor will tell you about it all," she said, nodding significantly, and lowering her voice. "He knows."

Mr. Luttrell questioned the doctor, and received his assurance that Vincenza's child (one of the twins) had been kept strictly apart from the little Brian Luttrell; and that there could be no danger of infection. In which assurance the doctor was perfectly sincere, not knowing that Vincenza's habit had been to spend a portion of almost every evening at her mother's house, in order to see her own children, to whom, however, she did not seem to be passionately attached.

It is to be noted that the Luttrells still learned nothing of the existence of the other baby; they fancied that all Vincenza's children were dead. Vincenza had thought that the English lady would be prejudiced against her if she knew that she was the mother of twins, and had left them both to old Assunta's care; so, even when Lippo was laid to rest in the churchyard at San Stefano, the little Dino was carefully kept in the background and not suffered to appear. Neither Mr. Luttrell nor Mrs. Luttrell (until long afterwards) knew that Vincenza had another child.

Two months passed before Mrs. Luttrell was sufficiently restored to health to be able to see her children. The day came at last when little Richard was summoned to her room to kiss a pale woman with great, dark eyes, at whom he gazed solemnly, wonderingly, but with a profound conviction that his own mamma had gone away and left her place to be filled up by somebody else. In point of fact, Mrs. Luttrell's expression was

curiously changed; and the boy's instinct discovered the change at once. There was a restless, wandering look in her large, dark eyes which had never been visible in them before her illness, except in moments of strong excitement. She did not look like herself.

"I want the baby," she said, when she had kissed little Richard and talked to him for a few moments. "Where is my baby?"

Mr. Luttrell came up to her side and answered her.

"The baby is coming, Margaret; Vincenza is bringing him." Then, after a pause—"Baby has been ill," he said. "You must be prepared to see a great change in him."

She looked at him as if she did not understand.

"What change shall I see?" she said. "Tell Vincenza to make haste, Edward. I must see my baby at once; the doctor said I might see him to-day."

"Don't excite yourself, Margaret; I'll fetch them," said Mr. Luttrell, easily. "Come along, Dick; let us find Vincenza and little brother Brian."

He quitted the room, with Dick at his heels. Mrs. Luttrell was left alone. But she had not long to wait. Vincenza entered, made a low reverence, uttered two or three sentences of congratulation on the English signora's recovery, and then placed the baby on Mrs. Luttrell's lap.

What happened next nobody ever precisely knew. But in another moment Vincenza fled from the room, with her hands to her ears, and her face as white as death.

"The signora is mad—mad!" she gasped, as she met Mr. Luttrell in the corridor. "She does not know her own child! She says that she will kill it! I dare not go to her; she says that her baby is dead, and that that one is mine! Mine! mine! Oh, Holy Virgin in Heaven! she says that the child is mine!"

Wherewith Vincenza went into strong hysterics, and Mr. Luttrell strode hastily towards his wife's room, from which the cries of a child could be heard. He found Mrs. Luttrell sitting with the baby on her knee, but although the poor little thing was screaming with all its might, she vouchsafed it no attention.

"Tell Vincenza to take her wretched child away," she said. "I want my own. This is her child; not mine."

Edward Luttrell stood aghast.

"Margaret, what do you mean?" he ejaculated. "Vincenza's child is dead. This is our little Brian. You are dreaming."

He did not know whether she understood him or not, but a wild light suddenly flashed into her great, dark eyes. She dashed the child down upon the bed with the fury of a mad woman.

"You are deceiving me," she cried; "I know that my child is dead. Tell me the truth; my child is dead!"

"No such thing, Margaret," cried Mr. Luttrell, almost angrily; "how can you utter such folly?"

But his remonstrance passed unheeded. Mrs. Luttrell had sunk insensible to the floor; and her swoon was followed by a long and serious relapse, during which it seemed very unlikely that she would ever awake again to consciousness.

The crisis approached. She passed it safely and recovered. Then came the tug of war. The little Brian was brought back to the house, with Vincenza as his nurse; but Mrs. Luttrell refused to see him. Doctors declared her dislike of the child to be a form of mania; her husband certainly believed it to be so. But the one fact remained. She would not acknowledge the child to be her own, and she would not consent to its being brought up as Edward Luttrell's son. Nothing would convince her that her own baby still lived, or that this child was not the offspring of the Vasari household. Mr. Luttrell expostulated. Vincenza protested and shed floods of tears, the doctor, the monks, the English nurse were all employed by turn, in the endeavour to soften her heart; but every effort was useless. Mrs. Luttrell declared that the baby which Vincenza had brought her was not her child, and that she should live and die in this conviction.

Was she mad? Or was some wonderful instinct of mother's love at the bottom of this obstinate adherence to her opinion?

Mr. Luttrell honestly thought that she was mad. And then, mild man as he was, he rose up and claimed his right as her husband to do as he thought fit. He sent for his solicitor, a Mr. Colquhoun, through whom he went so far even as to threaten his wife with severe measures if she did not yield. He would not live with her, he said—or Mr. Colquhoun reported that he said—unless she chose to bury her foolish fancy in oblivion. There was no doubt in his mind that the child was Brian Luttrell, not Lippo Vasari, whose name was recorded on a rough wooden cross in the churchyard of San Stefano And he insisted upon it that his wife should receive the child as her own.

It was a long fight, but in the end Mrs. Luttrell had to yield. She dismissed Vincenza, and she returned to Scotland with the two children. Her husband exacted from her a promise that she would never again speak of the wild suspicion that had entered her mind; that under no circumstances would she ever let the poor little boy know of the painful doubt that had been thrown on his identity. Mrs. Luttrell promised, and for three-and-twenty years she kept her word. Perhaps she would not have broken it then but for a certain great trouble which fell upon her, and

which caused a temporary revival of the strange madness which had led her to hate the child placed in her arms at San Stefano.

It was not to be wondered at that Edward Luttrell made a favourite of his second son in after life. A sense of the injustice done him by his mother made the father especially tender to the little Brian; he walked with him, talked with him, made a companion of him in every possible way. Mrs. Luttrell regained by degrees the cold composure of manner that had distinguished her in earlier life: but she could not command herself so far as to make a show of affection for her younger son. Brian was a very small boy indeed when he found that out. "Mother doesn't love me," he said once to his father, with grieving lips and tear-filled eyes; "I wonder why." What could his father do but press him passionately to his broad breast and assure him in words of tenderest affection that he loved his boy; and that if Brian were good, and true, and brave, his mother would love him too! "I will be very good then," said Brian, nestling close up to his fa her's shoulder—for he was a child with exceedingly winning ways and a very affectionate disposition—and putting one arm round Mr. Luttrell's neck. "But you know she loves Richard always—even when he is naughty. And you love me when I'm naughty, too." What could Mr. Luttrell say to that?

He died when Brian was fifteen years old; and the last words upon his tongue were an entreaty that his wife would never tell the boy of the suspicion that had turned her love to him into bitterness. He died, and part of the sting of his death to Mrs. Luttrell lay in the fact that he died thinking her mad on that one point. The doctors had called her conviction "a case of mania," and he had implicitly believed them.

But suppose she had not been mad all the time!

II.

In San Stefano life went on tranquilly from month to month and year to year. In 1867, Padre Cristoforo of the Benedictine Monastery, looked scarcely older than when he picked out a nurse for the Luttrell family in 1854. He was a tall man, with a stooping gait and a prominent, sagacious chin; deep-set, meditative, dark eyes, and a somewhat fine and subtle sort of smile which flickered for a moment at the corner of his thin-lipped mouth, and disappeared before you were fully conscience of its presence. He was summoned one day from the monastery (where he now filled the office of sub-Prior) at the earnest request of an old woman who lived in a neighbouring village. She had known him many years before, and thought that it would be easier to

tell her story to him than to a complete stranger. He had received her communication, and stood by her pallet with evident concern and astonishment depicted upon his face. He held a paper in his hand, at which he glanced from time to time as the woman spoke.

"It was not my doing," moaned the old crone. "It was my daughter's. I have but told you what she said to me five years ago. She said that she did change the children; it was Lippo, indeed, who died, but the child whom the English lady took to England with her was Vincenza's little Dino; and the boy whom we know as Dino is really the English child. I know not whether it is true! Santa Vergine! what more can I say?"

"Why did you not reveal the facts five years ago?" said the Father, with some severity of tone.

"I will tell you, Reverend Father. Because Vincenza came to me next day and said that she had lied—that the child, Dino, was her own, after all, and that she had only wanted to see how much I would believe. What was I to do? I do not know which story to believe; that is why I tell both stories to you before I die."

"She denied it, then, next day?"

"Yes, Father; but her husband believed it, as you will see by that paper. He wrote it down—he could write and read a little, which I could never do; and he told me what he had written:—'I, Giovanni Vasari, have heard my wife, Vincenza, say that she stole an English gentleman's child, and put her own child in its place. I do not know whether this is true; but I leave my written word that I was innocent of any such crime, and humbly pray to Heaven that she may be forgiven if she committed it.' Is that right, Reverend Father? And then his name, and the day and the year."

"Quite right," said Padre Cristoforo. "It was written just before Giovanni died. The matter cannot possibly be proved without further testimony. Where is Vincenza?"

"Alas, Father, I do not know. Dead, I think, or she would have come back to me before now. I have not heard of her since she took a situation as maid to a lady in Turin four years ago."

"Why have you told me so useless a story at all, then?" said the father, again with some sternness of voice and manner. "Evidently Vincenza was fond of romancing; and, probably—probably——" He did not finish his sentence; but he was thinking—"Probably the mad fancy of that English lady about her child—which I well remember—suggested the story to Vincenza as a means of getting money. I wish I had her here."

"I have told you the story, Reverend Father," said the old

woman, whose voice was growing very weak, "because I know that I am dying, and that the boy will be left alone in the world, which is a sad fate for any boy, Father, whether he is Vincenza's child or the son of the English lady. He is a good lad, Reverend Father, strong, and obedient, and patient; if the good Fathers would but take charge of him, and see that he is taught a trade, or put to some useful work! He would be no burden to you, my poor, little Dino!"

For a moment the Benedictine's eyes flashed with a quick fire; then he looked down and stood perfectly still, with his hands folded and his head bent. A new idea had darted across his mind. Did the story that he had just heard offer him no opportunity of advancing the interests of his Order and of his Church?

He turned as if to ask another question, but he was too late. Old Assunta was fast falling into the stupor that is but the precursor of death. He called her attendant, and waited for a time to see whether consciousness was likely to return. But he waited in vain. Assunta said nothing more.

The boy of whom she had spoken came and wept at her bedside, and Padre Cristoforo observed him curiously. He was well worthy of the monk's gaze. He was light and supple in figure, perfectly formed, with a clear brown skin and a face such as one sees in early Italian paintings of angelic singing-boys—a face with broad, serious brows, soft, oval cheeks, curved lips, and delightfully-dimpled chin. He had large, brown eyes and a mass of tangled, curling hair. The priest noted that his slender limbs were graceful as those of a young fawn, that his hands and feet were small and well shaped, and that his appearance betokened perfect health—a slight spareness and sharpness of outline being the only trace which poverty seemed to have left upon him.

The sub-Prior of San Stefano saw these things, and meditated upon certain possibilities in the future. He went next day to old Assunta's funeral, and laid his hand on Dino's shoulder as the boy was turning disconsolately from his grandmother's grave.

"My child," he said, gently, "you are alone."

"Yes, Father," said Dino, with a stifled sob.

"Will you come with me to the monastery? I think we can find you a home. You have nowhere to go, poor child, and you will be weary and hungry before long. Will you come?"

"There is nothing in the world that I should like so well!" cried the boy, ardently.

"Come then," said the Padre, with one of his subtle smiles. "We will go together."

He held out his hand, in which Dino gladly laid his hot and

trembling fingers. Then the monk and the boy set out on the three miles' walk which lay between them and the monastery.

On their arrival, Padre Cristoforo left the boy in the cool cloisters whilst he sought the Prior — a dignitary whose permission would be needed before Dino would be allowed to stay. There was a school in connection with the monastery, but it was devoted chiefly to the training of young priests, and it was not probable that a peasant like Dino Vasari would be admitted to the ranks of these budding ecclesiastics. The Prior thought that old Assunta's grandchild would make a good helper for Giacomo, the dresser of the vines.

"Does that not satisfy you?" said Padre Cristoforo, in a rather peculiar tone, when he had carried this proposal to Dino, and seen the boy's face suddenly fall, and his eyes fill with tears.

"The Reverend Fathers are very good," said Dino, in a somewhat embarrassed fashion, "and I will do all that I can to serve them, and, if I could also learn to read and write—and listen to the music in the chapel sometimes—I would work for them all the days of my life."

Padre Cristoforo smiled.

"You shall have your wish, my child," he said, kindly. "You shall go to the school—not to the vine-dressers. You shall be our son now."

But Dino looked up at him timidly.

"And not the English lady's?" he said.

"What do you know about an English lady, my son?"

"My grandmother talked to me of her. Is it true? She said that I might turn out to be an Englishman, after all. She said that Vincenza told her that I did not belong to her."

"My child," said the monk, calmly but firmly, "put these thoughts away from your mind. They are idle and vain imaginations. Assunta knew nothing; Vincenza did not always speak the truth. In any case, it is impossible to prove the truth of her story. It is a sin to let your mind dwell on the impossible. Your name is Bernardino Vasari, and you are to be brought up in the monastery of San Stefano by wise and pious men. Is that not happiness enough for you?"

"Oh, yes, yes, indeed; I wish for nothing else," said Dino, throwing himself at Padre Cristoforo's feet, and pressing his lips to the monk's black gown, while the tears poured down his smooth, olive cheeks. "Indeed I am not ungrateful, Reverend Father, and I will never wish to be anything but what you want me to be."

"Better so," soliloquised the Father, when he had comforted Dino with kind words, and led him away to join the companions

that would henceforth be his; "better that he should not wish to rise above the station in which he has been brought up! We shall never prove Vincenza's story. If we could do that, we should be abundantly recompensed for training this lad in the doctrines of the Church—but it will never be. Unless, indeed, the woman Vincenza could be found and urged to confession. But that," said the monk, with a regretful sigh, "that is not likely to occur. And, therefore, the boy will be Dino Vasari, as far as I can see, to his life's end. And Vincenza's child is living in the midst of a rich English family under the name of Brian Luttrell. I must not forget the name. In days to come who knows whether the positions of these two boys may not be reversed?"

Thus mused Father Cristoforo, and then he smiled and shook his head.

"Vincenza was always a liar," he said to himself. "It is the most unlikely thing in the world that her story should be true."

END OF THE PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER II.

BY THE LOCH.

"IT is you who have been the thief, then?"

The question was uttered in tones of withering contempt. The criminal, standing before his judge with downcast face and nervously-twitching fingers, found not a word to reply.

"Answer me," said Richard Luttrell, imperatively. "Tell me the truth—or, by Heaven, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life, and make you speak! Did you, or did you not, take this money out of my strong-box?"

"I meant to put it back," faltered the culprit. He was a slender lad of twenty, with the olive skin, the curling jet-black hair, the liquid-brown eyes, which marked his descent from a southern race. The face was one of singular beauty. The curved lips, the broad brow on which the dusky hair grew low, the oval cheek and rounded chin might well have served for the impersonation of some Spanish beggar-boy or Neapolitan fisher-lad. They were of the subtilely sensuous type, expressive of passion rather than of intellect or will. At present, with the usual rich, ripe colour vanished from cheek and lips, with eyes downcast, and trembling hands dropped to his sides, he was a picture of embodied shame and fear which his cousin and guardian, Richard Luttrell, regarded with unmitigated disgust.

Luttrell himself was a man of very different fibre. Tall, strong, fiercely indignant, he towered over the youth as if he could

willingly have smitten him to the earth. He was a fine-looking, broad-shouldered man of twenty-eight, with strongly-marked features, browned by exposure to the sun and wind. The lower part of his face was almost hidden by a crisp chestnut beard and moustache, whilst his eyes were of the reddish hazel tint which often denotes heat of temper. The fire which now shot from beneath the severely knitted brows might indeed have dismayed a person of stouter heart than Hugo Luttrell. The youth showed no signs of penitence; he was thoroughly dismayed and alarmed by the position in which he found himself, but that was all.

The scene of their interview was hardly in accordance with its painful character. The three men—for there was another whom we have not attempted to describe—stood on the border of a small loch, the tranquil waters of which came lapping almost to their feet as they spoke together. The grassy shores were fringed with alder and rowan-trees. Above the heads of the speakers waved the branches of a great Scotch fir, the outpost and sentinel, as it were, of an army of its brethren, standing discreetly a few yards away from the banks of the loch. Richard Luttrell's house, though not far distant, was out of sight; and the one little, grey-stone cottage which could be seen had no windows fronting the water. It was a spot, therefore, in which a prolonged conversation could be carried on without much fear of disturbance. Beyond the trees, and on each side of the loch, were ranged the silent hills; their higher crags purple in the sunlight, brown and violet in shadow. The tints of the heather were beginning to glow upon the moors; on the lower-lying slopes a mass of foliage showed its first autumnal colouring; here and there a field of yellow stubble gave a dash of almost dazzling brightness to the landscape, under the cloudless azure of a September sky. Hills, woods, and firmament were alike reflected with mirror-like distinctness in the smooth bosom of the loch, where little, brown ducks swam placidly amongst the weeds, and swallows skimmed and dipped and flew in happy ignorance of the ruin that guilt and misery can work in the lives of men.

Richard Luttrell stood with his back towards the open door of a large wooden shed used as a boat-house, the interior of which looked densely black by contrast with the brilliant sunlight on the green grass and trees outside it. An open box or two, a heap of fishing tackle, a broken oar, could be seen but dimly from without. It was in one of these boxes that Richard Luttrell had made, early in the day, a startling discovery. He had come across a pocket-book which had been abstracted from

his strong-box in a most mysterious way about a week before. On opening it, he found, not only certain bank notes which he had missed, but some marked coins and a cornelian seal which had disappeared on previous occasions, proving that a system of robbery had been carried on by one and the same person—evidently a member of the Luttrell household. The spoil was concealed with great care in a locked box on a shelf, and but for an accidental stumble by which Luttrell had brought down the whole shelf and broken the box itself, it would probably have remained there undisturbed. No one would ever have dreamt of seeking for Luttrell's pocket-book in a box in the boat-house.

"How did this get here? Who keeps the second key of the boat-house?" demanded Richard in the first moment of his discovery.

And Brian, his younger brother, answered carelessly—

"Hugo has had it for the last week or two."

Then, disturbed by his brother's tone, he came to Richard's side and looked at the fragments of the box by which Richard was still kneeling. With an exclamation of surprise he took up the lid of the box and examined it carefully. The name of its owner had been printed in ink on the smooth, brown surface—Hugo Luttrell. And the stolen property was hidden in that little wooden box.

The exclamations of the two brothers were characteristic. Richard raised himself with the pocket-book in his hand, and said vehemently—

"The young scoundrel! He shall rue it!"

While Brian, looking shocked and grieved, sat down on the stump of a tree and muttered, "Poor lad!" between his teeth, as he contemplated the miserable fragments on the ground.

The sound of a bell came faintly to their ears through the clear morning air. Richard spoke sharply.

"We must leave the matter for the present. Don't say anything about it. Lock up the boat-house, Brian, and keep the key. We'll have Hugo down here after breakfast, and see whether he'll make a clean breast of it."

"He may know nothing at all about it," suggested Brian, rising from his seat.

"It is to be hoped so," said Luttrell, curtly. He walked out of the boat-house with frowning brows and sparkling eyes. "I know one thing—my roof won't shelter him any longer if he is guilty." And then he marched away to the house, leaving Brian to lock the door and follow at his ease.

That morning's breakfast was long remembered in the Luttrells' house as a period of vague and curious discomfort. The reddish

light in Richard's eyes was well known for a danger signal; a storm was in the air when he wore that expression of suppressed emotion. Brian, a good deal disturbed by what had occurred, scarcely spoke at all; he sat with his eyes fixed on the table, forgetting to eat, and glancing only from time to time at Hugo's young, beautiful, laughing face, as the lad talked gaily to a visitor, or fed the dogs—privileged inmates of the dining-room—with morsels from his own plate. It was impossible to think that this handsome boy, just entering on the world, fresh from a military college, with a commission in the Lancers, should have chosen to rob the very man who had been his benefactor and friend, whose house had sheltered him for the last ten years of his life. What could he have wanted with this money? Luttrell made him a handsome allowance, had paid his bills more than once, provided his outfit, put all the resources of his home at Hugo's disposal, as if he had been a son of the house instead of a penniless dependent—had, in short, behaved to him with a generosity which Brian might have resented had he been of a resentful disposition, seeing that he himself had been much less liberally treated. But Brian never concerned himself about that view of the matter; only now, when he suspected Hugo of dishonesty and ingratitude, did he run over in his mind a list of the benefits which the boy had received for many years from the master of the house, and grow indignant at the enumeration. Was it possible that Hugo could be guilty? He had not been truthful as a schoolboy, Brian remembered; once or twice he had narrowly escaped public disgrace for some dishonourable act—dishonourable in the eyes of his companions, as well as of his masters—a fact which was not to Hugo's credit. Perhaps, however, there was now some mistake—perhaps the matter might be cleared up. Appearances were against him, but Hugo might yet vindicate his integrity——"

Brian's meditations were interrupted at this point. His brother had risen from the breakfast-table and was addressing Hugo, with a great show of courtesy, but with the stern light in his eyes which always made those who knew him best be on their guard with Richard Luttrell. "If you are at liberty," he said, "I want you down at the boat-house. I am going there now."

Brian, who was watching his cousin, saw a sudden change in his face. His lips turned white, his eyes moved uneasily in their sockets. It seemed almost as if he glanced backwards and forwards in order to look for a way of escape. But no escape was possible. Richard stood waiting, severe, inflexible, with that ominous gleam in his eyes. Hugo rose and followed like a dog at his master's call. From the moment that Brian marked

his sullen, hang-dog expression and drooping head, he gave up his hope of proving Hugo's innocence. He would gladly have absented himself from the interview, but Richard summoned him in a voice that admitted of no delay.

The lad's own face and words betrayed him when he was shown the pocket-book and the broken box. He stammered out excuses, prevaricated, lied; until at last Luttrell lost all patience, and insisted upen a definite reply to his question. And then Hugo muttered his last desperate self-justification—that he had "meant to put it back!"

Richard's stalwart figure, the darkness of his brow, the strong hand in which he was swinging a heavy hunting-crop—caught up, as he left the house, for no decided purpose, but disagreeably significant in Hugo's eyes—became doubly terrible to the lad during the interval of silence that followed his avowal. He glanced supplicatingly at Brian; but Brian had no aid to give him now. And, when Brian's help failed him, Hugo felt that all was lost.

Meanwhile, Brian himself, a little in the back ground, leaned against the trunk of a tree which grew close to the shallow water's edge, bent his eyes upon the ground and tried to see the boy's face as little as possible. His affection for Hugo had given him an influence over the lad which Richard had certainly never possessed. For, generous as Richard might be, he was not fond of his young cousin; and Hugo, being aware of this fact, regarded him with instinctive aversion. In his own fashion he did love Brian—a little bit!

Brian Luttrell was at this time barely three-and-twenty. He had rooms in London, where he was supposed to be reading for the bar, but his tastes were musical and literary, and he had not yet made much progress in his legal studies. He had a handsome, intellectual face of a very refined type, thoughtful dark eyes, a long, brown moustache, and small pointed beard of the same colour. He was slighter, less muscular, than Richard; and the comment often made upon him was that he had the look of a dreamer, perhaps of an artist—not of a very practical man—and that he was extremely unlike his brother. There was, indeed, a touch of unusual and almost morbid sensitiveness in Brian's nature, which, betraying itself, as it did, from time to time, only by a look, a word, a gesture, yet proved his unlikeness to Richard Luttrell more than any dissimilarity of feature could have done.

"You meant to put it back, sir!" thundered Richard, after that moment's pause, which seemed like an eternity to Hugo. "And where did you mean to get the money from? Steal it from

some one else? Folly! lies! And for what disgraceful reason did you take it at all? You are in debt, I presume?"

Hugo's white lips signified assent.

"You have been gambling again?"

He bowed his head.

"I thought so. I told you three months ago that I had paid your gambling debts for the last time. I make one exception. I will pay them once again—with the money you have stolen, which you may keep. Much good may it do you!" He flung the pocket-book on the turf at Hugo's feet as he spoke. "Take it. You have paid dearly enough for it, God knows. For the future, sir, manage your own affairs; my house is no longer open to you."

"Don't be hard on him, Richard," said Brian, in a voice too low to reach Hugo's ears. "Forgive him this time; he is only a boy, after all—and a boy with a bad training."

"Will you be so good as to mind your own business, Brian?" said the elder brother, peremptorily. The severity of his tone increased as he addressed himself again to Hugo. "You will leave Netherglen to-day. Your luggage can be sent after you; give your own directions about it. I suppose you will rejoin your regiment? I neither know nor care what you mean to do. If we meet again, we meet as strangers."

"Willingly," said Hugo, lifting his eyes for one instant to his cousin's face, with an expression so full of brooding hatred and defiance that even Richard Luttrell was amazed.

"For Heaven's sake don't say that, Hugo," began the second brother, with a hasty desire to pave the way for reconciliation.

"Why not?" said Hugo.

The look of abject fear was dying out of his face. The worst, he thought, was over. He drew himself up, crossed his arms, and tried to meet Brian's reproachful eyes with confidence, but in this attempt he was not successful. In spite of himself, the eyelids dropped until the long, black lashes almost touched the smooth, olive cheek, across which passed a transient flush of shame. This sign of feeling touched Brian; the lad was surely not hopelessly bad if he could blush for his sins. But Richard went on ruthlessly.

"You need expect no further help from me. I own you as a relation no longer. You have disgraced the name you bear. Don't let me see you again in my house." He was too indignant, too much excited, to speak in anything but short, sharp sentences, each of which seemed more bitter than the last. Richard Luttrell was little concerned for Hugo's welfare, much for the honour of the family. "Go," he said, "at once, and I will not publish your

shameful conduct to the world. If you return to my house, if you seek to establish any communication with members of my family, I shall not keep your secret."

"Speak for yourself, Richard," said his brother, warmly, "not for me. I hope that Hugo will do better in time; and I don't mean to give him up. You must make an exception for me when you speak of separating him from the family."

"I make no exception," said Richard.

Brian drew nearer to his brother, and uttered his next words in a lower tone.

"Think what you are doing," he said. "You will drive him to desperation, and, after all, he is only a boy of nineteen. Quite young enough to repent and reform, if we are not too hard upon him now. Do as you think fit for yourself and your own household, but you must not stand in the way of what I can do for him, little though that may be."

"I stand to what I have said," answered Richard, harshly. "I will have no communication between him and you." Then, folding his arms, he looked grimly and sardonically into Brian's face. "I trust neither of you," he said. "We all know that you are only too easily led by those whom you like to be led by, and he is a young reprobate. Choose for yourself, of course; I have no claim to control you, only, if you choose to be friendly with him, I shall cut off the supplies to you as well as to him, and I shall expose him publicly."

Brian took away the hand which, in the ardour of his pleading, he had laid upon Richard's arm. Had it not been for Hugo's sake, he would have quitted the spot in dudgeon. He knew in his heart that it was useless to argue with Richard in his present state of passion. But for Hugo's sake he swallowed his resentment, and made one more trial.

"If he repents——" he began doubtfully, and never finished the sentence.

"I don't repent," said Hugo.

His voice was hoarse and broken, but insolently defiant. By a great effort of will he fixed his haggard eyes full on Richard Luttrell's face as he spoke. Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"You hear?" he said, briefly to his brother.

"I hear." Brian answered, in a low, pained tone.

With an air of bravado Hugo stooped and picked up the pocket-book which still lay at his feet. He weighed it in his hand, and then laughed aloud, though not very steadily.

"It is full still," he said. "It will be useful, no doubt. I am much obliged to you, Cousin Richard."

The action, and the words accompanying it, shocked even

Richard, who professed to think nothing too bad for Hugo's powers. He tossed his head back and turned away with a contemptuous "Good Heavens!" Brian walked for a few paces distance, and then stood still, with his back to his cousin. Hugo glanced from one to the other with uneasiness, which he tried to veil by an assumption of disdain, and dropped the purse furtively into his pocket. He was ill-pleased to see Richard turn back with lowered eyebrows, and a look of stern determination upon his bearded face.

"Brian," said Luttrell, more quietly than he had yet spoken, "I think I see mother coming down the road. Will you meet her and lead her away from the loch, without telling her the reason? I don't wish her to meet this—this gentleman—again."

The intonation of his voice, the look that he bestowed upon Hugo at the words that he emphasised, made the lad quiver from head to foot with rage. Brian walked away without turning to bestow another glance or word on Hugo. It was a significant action, and one which the young fellow felt, with a throb of mingled shame and hatred, that he could understand. He clenched his hands until the dent of the nails brought blood, without knowing what he did; then made a step or two in another direction, as if to leave the place. Richard's commanding voice made him pause.

"Stop!" said Luttrell. "Wait until I give you leave to go."

Hugo waited, with his face turned towards the shining waters of the loch. The purple mist amongst the distant hills, the golden light upon the rippling water, the reddening foliage of the trees, had never been more beautiful than they were that morning. But their beauty was lost upon Hugo, whose mind was filled with hard and angry protests against the treatment that he was receiving, and a great dread of the somewhat desolate future.

Richard Luttrell moved about restlessly, stopping short, now and then, to watch the figure in black which he had discerned upon the road near the house. He saw Brian meet it; the two stood and spoke together for a few minutes; then Brian gave his arm to his mother, and led her back to the house. When they were quite out of sight, Luttrell turned back to his cousin and spoke again.

"Now that I have got Brian out of the way," he said, as he laid an iron hand on Hugo's arm, "I am free to punish you as I choose. Mind, I would have spared you this if you had not had the insufferable insolence to pick up that pocket-book in my presence. Since you were shameless enough for that, it is

plain what sort of chastisement you deserve. Take that—and that—and that!"

He lifted his hunting-crop as he spoke, and brought it down heavily on the lad's shoulders. Hugo uttered a cry like that of a wild animal in pain, and fought with hands, feet, teeth even, against the infliction of the stinging blows; but he fought in vain. His cousin's superior strength mastered him from the beginning; he felt like an infant in Richard's powerful grasp. Not until the storm of furious imprecations in which the lad at first vented his impotent rage had died away into stifled moans and sobs of pain, did Richard's vengeance come to an end. He flung the boy from him, broke the whip between his strong hands, and hurled the fragments far into the water, then walked away to the house, leaving Hugo to sob his heart out, like a passionate child, with face down in the short, green grass.

CHAPTER III.

HUGO LUTTRELL.

Hugo's Sicilian mother had transmitted to him a nature at once fierce and affectionate, passionate and cunning. Half-child, half-savage, he seemed to be bound by none of the restraints that civilised men early learn to place upon their instincts. He expressed his anger, his sorrow, his love, with all the abandon that characterised the natives of those sunny shores where the first years of his life were spent. Profoundly simple in his modes of feeling, he was yet dominated by the habits of slyness and trickery which seem to be inherent in the truly savage breast. He had the savage's love of secrecy and instinctive suspicion of his fellow-creatures, the savage's swift passions and vindictiveness, the savage's innate difficulty in comprehending the laws of honour and morality. It is possible to believe that, with good training from his infancy, Hugo Luttrell might have developed into a trustworthy and straightforward man, shrinking from dishonesty and cowardice as infamy worse than death; but his early education had been of a kind likely to foster every vice that he possessed. His father, a cousin of the Luttrells of Netherglen, after marrying a lovely Palermitan, and living for three years with her in her native land, had at last tired of her transports of love and jealousy, and started upon an exploring expedition in South Africa. Hugo was brought up by a mother who adored him and taught him to loathe the English race. He was surrounded by flatterers and sycophants from his babyhood, and treated as if he were born to a kingdom. When he was twelve years old, however, his mother died; and his father, on

learning her death some months afterwards, made it his business to fetch the boy away from Sicily and bring him to England. But Hugh Luttrell, the father, was already a dying man. The seeds of disease had been developed during his many journeyings; he was far gone in consumption before he even reached the English shores. His own money was nearly spent. There was a law-suit about the estates belonging to his wife's father, and it was scarcely probable that they would devolve upon Hugo, who had cousins older than himself and dearer to the Sicilian grandfather's heart. The dying man turned in his extremity to the young head of the house, Richard Luttrell, then only twenty-one years of age, and did not turn in vain. Richard Luttrell undertook the charge of the boy, and as soon as the father was laid in the grave, he took Hugo home with him to Netherglen.

Richard Luttrell could hardly have treated Hugo more generously than he did, but it must be confessed that he never liked the boy. The faults which were evident from the first day of his entrance into the Luttrells' home, were such as disgusted and repelled the somewhat austere young ruler of the household. Hugo pilfered, lied, cringed, stormed, in turn, like a veritable savage. He was sent to school, and learned the wisdom of keeping his tongue silent, and his evil deeds concealed, but he did not learn to amend his ways. In spite of his frequent misconduct, he had some qualities which endeared him to the hearts of those whom he cared to conciliate. His *naïveté*, his caressing ways, his beautiful, delicate face and appealing eyes, were not without effect even upon the severest of his judges. Owing, perhaps, to these attributes rather than to any positive merit of his own, he scrambled through life at school, at a tutor's, at a military college, without any irreparable disgrace, his aptitude for getting into scrapes being equalled only by his cleverness in getting out of them. Richard, indeed, had at times received reports of his conduct which made him speak angrily and threaten condign punishment, but not until this day, when the discovery of the lost bank-notes in Hugo's possession betokened an absence of principle transcending even Richard's darkest anticipations, had any serious breach occurred between the cousins. With some men, the fact that it was the first grave offence would have had weight, and inclined them to be merciful to the offender, but Richard Luttrell was not a merciful man. When he discovered wrong-doing, he punished it with the utmost severity, and never trusted the culprit again. He had been known to say, in boasting accents, that he did not understand what forgiveness meant. Forgiveness of injuries? Weakness of mind; that was his opinion.

Hugo Luttrell's nature was also not a forgiving one. He lay upon the grass, writhing, sobbing, tearing at the ground in an access of passion equally composed of rage and shame. He had almost lost the remembrance of his own offence in resentment of its punishment. He had been struck; he had been insulted; he, a Sicilian gentleman! (Hugo never thought of himself as an Englishman.) He loathed Richard Luttrell; he muttered curses upon him as he lay on the earth, with every bone aching from his cousin's blows; he wished that he could wipe out the memory of the affront in Richard's blood. Richard would laugh at a challenge; a duel was not the English method of settling quarrels. "I will punish him in another way; it is a *vendetta!*" said Hugo to himself, choking down his passionate, childish sobs. "He is a brute—a great, savage brute; he does not deserve to live!"

He was too much absorbed in his reflections to notice a footstep on the grass beside him, and the rustle of a woman's dress. Some one had drawn near, and was looking pityingly, wonderingly, down upon the slight, boyish form that still shook and quivered with irrepressible emotion. A woman's voice sounded in his ear. "Hugo!" it said; "Hugo, what is the matter?"

With a start he lifted his head, showed a flushed, tear-swollen countenance for one moment, and then hid it once more in his hands. "Oh, Angela, Angela!" he cried; and then the hysterical passion mastered him once more. He could not speak for sobs.

She knelt down beside him and placed one hand soothingly upon his ruffled, black locks. For a few minutes she also did not speak. She knew that he could not hear.

The world was not wrong when it called Angela Vivian a beautiful woman, although superfine critics objected that her features were not perfect, and that her hair, her eyes, her complexion, were all too colourless for beauty. But her great charm lay in the harmonious character of her appearance. To deepen the tint of that soft, pale hair—almost ash-coloured, with a touch of gold in the heavy coils—to redden her beautifully-shaped mouth, and her narrow, oval face, to imagine those sweet, calm, grey eyes of any more definite shade would have been to make her no longer the Angela Vivian that so many people knew and loved. But if fault were found with her face, no exception could be taken to her figure and the grace with which she moved. There, at least, she was perfect.

Angela Vivian was twenty-three, and still unmarried. It was said that she had been difficult to please. But her choice was made at last. She was to be married to Richard Luttrell before the end of the year. They had been playmates in childhood, and

their parents had been old friends. Angela was now visiting Mrs. Luttrell, who was proud of her son's choice, and made much of her as a guest at Netherglen.

She spoke to Hugo as a sister might have done.

"What is it, dear?" she asked him, smoothing out his short, dark curls, as she spoke. "Can't you tell me? Is it some great trouble?"

For answer he dragged himself a little closer to her, and bowed his hot forehead on one of her hands, which she was resting on the ground, while she stroked his hair with the other. The action touched her; she did not know why. His sobs were quietening. He was by no means very manly, as English people understand manliness, but even he was ashamed to be found crying like a baby over his woes.

"Dear Hugo, can you not tell me what is wrong?" said Angela, more seriously alarmed by his silence than by his tears. She had a right to question him, for he had previously given her as much of his confidence as he ever gave to anybody, and she had been a very good friend to him. "Are you in some great trouble?"

"Yes," he said, in a voice so choked that she could hardly hear the word.

"And you have been in some scuffle surely. Your clothes are torn—you are hurt!" said she, sympathetically. "Why, Hugo, you must have been fighting!" Then, as he gave her no answer, she resumed in a voice of tender concern, "You are not really hurt, are you, dear boy? You can move—you can get up? Shall I fetch anyone to help you?"

"No, no, no!" he cried, clutching at her dress, as though to stay her going. "Don't leave me. I am not hurt—at least, I can walk and stand easily enough, though I have been hurt—set upon, and treated like—like a dog by him——"

"By whom, Hugo?" said Angela, startled by the tenor of his incoherent sentences. "Who has set upon you and ill-treated you?"

But Hugo hid his face. "I won't tell you," he said, sullenly.

There was a silence. "Can I do anything for you?" Angela asked at length, very gently.

"No."

She waited a little longer, and, as he made no further sign, she tried to rise. "Shall I go, Hugo?" she said.

"Yes—if you like." Then he burst out passionately, "Of course, you will go. You are like everybody else. You are like Richard Luttrell. You will do what he tells you. I am abandoned by everybody. You all hate me; and I hate you all!"

Little as Angela understood his words, there was something in them that made her seat herself beside him on the grass, instead of leaving him alone. "Dear Hugo," she said, "I have never hated you."

"But you will soon."

"I see," said she, softly. "I understand you now. You are in trouble—you have been doing something wrong, and you think that we shall be angry with you. Listen, Hugo, Richard may be angry at first, but he is kind as well as just. He will forgive you, and we shall love you as much as ever. I will tell him that you are sorry for whatever it is, and then he will not refuse his pardon."

"I don't want it," said Hugo, hoarsely. "I hate him."

"Hugo!"

"I hate him—I loathe him. You would hate him, too, if you knew him as well as I do. You are going to marry him! Well, you will be miserable all your life long, and then you will remember what I say."

"I should be angry with you if I did not know how little you meant this," said Angela, in an unruffled voice, although the faint colour had risen to her cheeks, and her eyes looked feverishly bright. "But you are not like yourself, Hugo; you are distressed about something. You know, at least, that we do not hate you, and you do not hate us."

"I do not hate you," said Hugo, with emphasis.

He seized a fold of her dress and pressed it to his lips. But he said nothing more, and by-and-bye, when she gently disengaged her gown from his hold, he made no opposition to her going. She left him with reluctance, but she knew that Mrs. Luttrell would want her at that hour, and did not like to be kept waiting. She glanced back when she reached the bend in the road that would hide him from her sight. She saw that he had resumed his former position, with his head bent upon his arms, and his face hidden.

"Poor Hugo!" she said to herself, as she turned towards the house.

Netherglen was a quaint-looking, irregular building of grey, stone, not very large, but considerably larger than its appearance led one to conjecture, from the fact that a wing had been added at the back of the house, where it was not immediately apparent. The peculiarity of this wing was that, although built close to the house, it did not actually touch it except at certain points where communication with the main part was necessary; the rooms on the outer wing ran parallel for some distance with those in the house, but were separated by an interval of one or two feet. This

was a precaution taken, it was said, in order to deaden the noise made by the children when they were in the nurseries situated in this part of the house. It had certainly been an effectual one; it was difficult to hear any sound proceeding from these rooms, even when one stood in the large central hall from which the sitting-rooms opened.

Angela was anxious to find Richard and ascertain whether or not he was really seriously incensed against his cousin, but he was not to be found. A party of guests had arrived unexpectedly for luncheon; Mrs. Luttrell and Brian were both busily engaged in entertaining them. Angela glanced at Brian; it struck her that he was not in his usual good spirits. But she had no chance of asking him if anything were amiss.

The master of the house arrived in time to take his place at the head of the table, and from the moment of his arrival, Angela was certain that he had been, if he were not still, seriously annoyed by some occurrence of the day. She knew his face very well, and she knew the meaning of the gleam of his eye underneath the lowered eyebrows, the twitching nostril, and the grim setting of his mouth. He spoke very little, and did not smile even when he glanced at her. These were ominous signs.

"Where is Hugo?" demanded Mrs. Luttrell as they seated themselves at the table. "Have you seen him, Brian?"

"Yes, I saw him down by the loch this morning," said Brian, but without raising his eyes.

"The bell had better be rung outside the house," said Mrs. Luttrell. "It can be heard quite well on the loch."

"It is unnecessary, mother," said Richard, promptly. "Hugo is not coming in to lunch."

There was a momentary flash of his eye as he spoke, which convinced Angela that Hugo's disgrace was to be no transient one. Her heart sank; she did not find that Richard's wrath was easy to appease when once thoroughly aroused. Again she looked at Brian, and it seemed to her that his face was paler and more sombre than she had ever seen it before.

The brothers were usually on such pleasant terms that their silence to each other during the meal became a matter of remark to others beside Angela and Mrs. Luttrell. Had they quarrelled? There was an evident coolness between them; for, on the only occasion on which they addressed each other, Richard contemptuously contradicted his brother with insulting directness, and Brian replied with what for him was decided warmth. But the matter dropped—perhaps each was ashamed of having manifested his annoyance in public—and only their silence to each other betrayed that anything was wrong.

The party separated into three portions after luncheon. Mrs. Luttrell and a lady of her own age agreed to remain indoors, or to stroll quietly round the garden. Angela and two or three other young people meant to get out the boat and fish the loch for pike. Richard and a couple of his friends were going to shoot in the neighbouring woods. And, while these arrangements were making, and everybody was standing about the hall, or in the wide porch which opened out into the garden, Hugo's name was again mentioned.

"What has become of that boy?" said Mrs. Luttrell. "He is not generally so late. Richard, do you know?"

"I'll tell you afterwards, mother," answered her son, in a low tone. "Don't say anything more about him just now.'

"Is there anything wrong?" said his mother, also lowering her voice. But he had turned away.

"Brian, what is it?" she asked, impatiently.

"In Heaven's sake, don't ask Brian," said Richard, looking back over his shoulder, "there is no knowing what he may not require you to believe. Leave the story to me."

"I've no desire to tell it," replied Brian, moving away.

Luttrell's friends were already outside the hall door, lighting their cigars and playing with the dogs. A keeper stood in the background, waiting until the party should start.

"Aren't you coming, Brian?" said one of the young men.

"I'll join you presently." said Brian. "I am going down to the loch first to get out the boat."

"What a splendid gun that is of yours!" said Archie Grant, the younger of the two men. "It is yours, is it not? I saw it in the corner of the hall as I came in. You had it the other day at the Duke's."

"It was not mine. It belongs to Hugo."

"Let me have a look at it again; it's an awfully fine one."

"Are you ready, Grant?" said Richard Luttrell, coming forward. "What are you looking for?"

"Oh, nothing; a gun," said the young fellow. "I see it's gone. I thought it was there when I first came in; it's of no consequence."

"Not your own gun, I suppose?"

"No, no; I have my own. It was Hugo's."

"Yes; rather a fine one," said Richard, indifferently. 'You're not coming, then?"—to Brian—"well, perhaps it's as well." And he marched away without deigning to bestow another look or word upon his brother.

Five minutes afterwards, Mrs. Luttrell and Angela encountered each other in a passage leading to one of the upper

rooms. No one was near. Mrs. Luttrell—she was a tall, handsome woman, strikingly like Richard, in spite of her snow-white hair—laid her hand gently on Angela's shoulder.

"Why do you look so pale, Angela?" she said. "Your eyes are red, child. Have you been crying because those ill-bred lads of mine could not keep a still tongue in their heads at the luncheon-table, but must needs wrangle together as they used to when they were just babies? Never you mind, my dear; it's not Richard's fault, and Brian was always a troublesome lad. It will be better for us all when he's away at his books in London."

She patted Angela's shoulder and passed on, leaving the girl more vexed than comforted. She was sorry to see Mrs. Luttrell show the partiality for Richard which everyone accused her of feeling. In the mother's eyes, Richard was always right and Brian wrong. Angela was just enough to be troubled at times by this difference in the treatment of the brothers.

Brian went down to the loch ostensibly to get out the boat. In reality he wanted to see whether Hugo were still there. Richard had told him of the punishment to which he had subjected the lad; and Brian had been frankly indignant about it. The two had come to high words; thus there had, indeed, been some foundation for the visitors' suspicions of a previous quarrel.

Hugo had disappeared; only the broken brushwood and the crushed bracken told of the struggle that had taken place, and of the boy's agony of grief and rage. Brian resolved to follow and find him. He did not like the thought of leaving him to bear his shame alone. Besides, he understood Hugo's nature, and he was afraid—though he scarcely knew what he feared.

But he searched in vain. Hugo was not to be found. He did not seem to have quitted the place altogether, for he had given no orders about his luggage, nor been seen on the road to the nearest town, and Brian knew that it would be almost impossible to find him in a short space of time if he did not wish to be discovered. It was possible that he had gone into the woods; he was as fond of them as a wild animal of his lair. Brian took his gun from the rack, as an excuse for an expedition, then sallied forth, scarcely hoping, however, to be successful in his search.

He had not gone very far when he saw a man's form at some little distance from him, amongst the trees. He stopped short and reconnoitered. No, it was not Hugo. That brown shooting-coat and those stalwart limbs belonged rather to Richard Luttrell. Brian looked, shrugged his shoulders to himself, and then turned back. He did not want to meet his brother then.

But Richard had heard the footstep and glanced round. After a moment of evident hesitation, he quitted his position and

tramped over the soft, uneven ground to his brother, who, seeing that he had been observed, awaited his brother's coming with some uncertainty of feeling.

Richard's face had wonderfully cleared since the morning, and his voice was almost cordial.

"You've come? That's right," he said.

"Got anything?"

"Nothing much. I never saw young Grant shoot so wild. And my hand's not very steady—after this morning's work." He laughed a little awkwardly and looked away. "That fellow deserved all he got, Brian. But if you choose to see him now and then and be friendly with him, it's your own look out. I don't wish to interfere."

It was a great concession from Richard—almost as much as an apology. Brian involuntarily put out his hand, which Richard grasped heartily if roughly. Neither of them found it necessary to say more. The mutual understanding was complete, and each hastily changed the subject, as though desirous that nothing further should be said about it.

If only some one had been by to witness that tacit reconciliation!

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE TWILIGHT.

It was already dusk under the thick branches of the wood, although the setting sun shone brilliantly upon the loch. Luttrell's friends were to dine with him, and as dinner was not until eight o'clock, they made rather a long circuit, and had some distance to return. Brian had joined Archie Grant; the second visitor was behind them with the keeper; Richard Luttrell had been accidentally separated from the others, and was supposed to be in front. Archie was laughing and talking gaily; Brian, whose mind ran much upon Hugo, was somewhat silent. But even he was no proof against Archie's enthusiasm, when the young fellow suddenly seized him by the arm, and pointed out a fine capercailzie which the dogs had just put up.

Brian gave a quick glance to his companion, who, however, had handed his gun to the keeper a short time before, and shook his head deprecatingly. Brian lifted his gun. It seemed to him that something was moving amongst the branches beyond the bird, and for a moment he hesitated—then pulled the trigger. And just as he touched it, Archie sprang forward with a cry.

"Don't fire! Are you blind? Don't you see what you are doing?"

But it was too late.

The bird flew away unharmed, but the shot seemed to have found another mark. There was the sound of a sudden, heavy fall. To Brian's horror and dismay he saw that a man had been standing amongst the brushwood and smaller trees just beyond the ridge of rising ground towards which his gun had been directed. The head only of this man could have been visible from the side of the bank on which Brian was standing; and even the head could be seen very indistinctly. As Brian fired, it seemed to him, curiously enough, as if another report rang in his ears beside that of his own gun. Was any one else shooting in the wood? Or had his senses played him false in the horror of the moment, and caused him to mistake an echo for another shot? He had not time to settle the question. For a moment he stood transfixed; then he rushed forward, but Archie had been before him. The young man was kneeling by the prostrate form and as Brian advanced, he looked up with a face as white as death.

"Keep back," he cried, scarcely knowing what he said. "Don't look—don't look, for a moment; perhaps he'll open his eyes: perhaps he is not dead. Keep back!"

Dead! Brian never forgot the sick feeling of dread which then came over him. What had he done? He did not hear Archie's excited words; he came hurriedly to the side of the man, who lay lifeless upon the ground, with his head on the young fellow's knee. Archie looked up at him with dilated, terrified eyes. And Brian stood stock still.

It was Richard who lay before him, dead as a stone. He had dropped without a cry, perhaps even without a pang. There was a little purple mark upon his temple, from which a drop of black blood had oozed. A half-smile still lingered on his mouth; his face had scarcely changed colour, his attitude was natural, and yet the spectators felt that Death had set his imprint on that tranquil brow. Richard Luttrell's day was over; he had gone to a world where he might perhaps stand in need of that mercy which he had been only too ready to deny to others who had erred.

Archie's elder brother, Donald Grant, and the keeper were hurrying to the spot. They found Brian on his knees beside the body, feeling with trembling hands for the pulse that beat no longer. His face was the colour of ashes, but as yet he had not uttered a single word. Donald Grant spoke first, with an anxious glance towards his brother.

"How——" he began, and then stopped short, for Archie had silenced him with an almost imperceptible sign towards Brian Luttrell.

"We heard two shots," muttered Donald, as he also bent over the prostrate form.

"Only one, I think," said Archie.

His brother pulled him aside.

"I tell you I heard two," he said in a hushed voice. "You didn't fire?"

"I had no gun."

"Was it Brian?"

"Yes. He shot straight at—at Richard; didn't see him a bit. He was always short-sighted."

Donald gave his brother a look, and then turned to the keeper, whose face was working with unwonted emotion at the sight before him.

"We must get help," he said, gravely. "He must be carried home, and some one must go to Dunmuir. Brian, shall I send to the village for you?"

He touched Brian's shoulder as he spoke. The young man rose, and turned his pale face and lack-lustre eyes towards his friend as though he could not understand the question. Donald repeated it, changing the form a little.

"Shall I send for the men?" he said.

Brian pressed his hand to his forehead.

"The men?" he said, vaguely.

"To carry—him to the house."

Donald was compassionate, but he was uncomprehending of his friend's apparent want of emotion. He wanted to stir him up to a more definite show of feeling. And to some extent he got his wish.

A look of horror came into Brian's eyes; a shudder ran through his frame.

"Oh, my God!" he whispered, hoarsely, "is it I who have done this thing?"

And then he threw up his hands as though to screen his eyes from the sight of the dead face, staggered a few steps away from the little group, and fell fainting to the ground.

It was a sad procession that wound its way through the woodland paths at last, and stopped at the gate of Netherglen. Brian had recovered sufficiently to walk like a mourner behind the covered stretcher on which his brother's form was laid; but he paid little attention to the whispers that were exchanged from time to time between the Grants and the men who carried that melancholy burden to the Luttrells' door. On coming to himself after his swoon he wept like a child for a little time, but had then collected himself and become sadly quiet and calm. Still, he was scarcely awake to anything but the mere fact of his

great misfortune, and it was not until the question was actually put to him, that he asked himself whether he could bear to take the news to his mother of the death of her eldest son.

Brave as he was, he shrank from the task. "No, no!" he said, looking wildly into Donald's face. "Not I. I am not the one to tell her, that I—that I——"

A great sob burst from him in spite of his usual self-control. Donald Grant turned aside; he did not know how to bear the spectacle of grief such as this. And there were others to be thought of beside Mrs. Luttrell. Miss Vivian—Richard Luttrell's promised wife—was in the house; Donald Grant's own sisters were still waiting for him and Archie. It was impossible to go up to the house without preparing its tenants for the blow that had fallen upon them. Yet who would prepare them?

"Here is the doctor," said Archie, turning towards the road. "He will tell them."

Doctor Muir had long been a trusted friend of the Luttrell family. He had liked Richard rather less than any other member of the household, but he was sincerely grieved and shocked by the news which had greeted him as he went upon his rounds. The Grants drew him aside and gave him their account of the accident before he spoke to Brian. The doctor had tears in his eyes when they had finished. He went up to Brian and pressed his unresponsive hand.

"My boy—my boy!" he said; "don't be cast down. It was the will of God." He pulled out a handkerchief and rubbed away a tear from his eyes as he spoke. "Shall I just see your poor mother? I'll step up to the house, and ye'll wait here till my return. Eh, but it's awful, awful!" The old man uttered the last words more to himself than to Brian, whose hand he again shook mechanically before he turned away.

Brian followed him closely. "Doctor," he said, in a low, husky voice, "I'll go with you."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Dr. Muir, sharply. "Why, man, your face would be enough to tell the news, in all conscience. You may walk to the door with me—the back door, if you please—but further you shall not come until I have seen Mistress Luttrell. Here, give me your arm; you're not fit to go alone with that white face. And how did it happen, my poor lad?"

"I don't know—I can't tell, said Brian, slowly. "I saw the bird rise from the bank—and then I saw something moving—but I thought I must be mistaken; and I fired, and he—he fell! By my hand, too! Oh, Doctor, is there a God in Heaven to let such things be?"

"Hut, tut, tut, but we'll have no such words as these, my bairn. If the Lord lets these things happen, we'll maybe find that He's had some good reason for't. He's always in the right. And ye must just learn to bow yourself, Brian, to the will of the Almighty, for there's no denying but He's laid a sore trial upon ye, my poor lad, and one that will be hard to bear."

"I shall never bear it," said Brian, who caught but imperfectly the drift of the doctor's simple words of comfort. "It is too hard—too hard to bear."

They had reached the back door, by which Dr. Muir preferred to make his entrance. He uttered a few words to the servants about the accident that had occurred, and then sent a message asking to speak alone with Mrs. Luttrell. The answer came back that Mrs. Luttrell would see him in the study. And thither the doctor went, leaving Brian in one of the cold, stone corridors that divided the kitchens and offices from the living-rooms of the house. Meanwhile, the body of Richard Luttrell was silently carried into one of the lower rooms until another place could be prepared for its reception.

How long Brian waited, with his forehead, pressed against the wall, deaf and blind to everything but an overmastering dread of his mother's agony which had taken complete possession of him, he did not know. He only knew that after a certain time—an eternity it seemed to him—a bitter, wailing cry came to his ears; a cry that pierced through the thick walls and echoed down the dark passages, although it was neither loud nor long. But there was something in the intensity of the grief that it expressed which seemed to give it a peculiarly penetrating quality. Ah, it was this sound that Brian now knew he had been dreading; this sound that cut him to the heart.

Dr. Muir, on coming hurriedly out from the study, found Brian in the corridor with his hands pressed to his ears as if to keep out the sound of that one fearful cry.

"Come away, my boy," he said, pitifully. "We can do no good here. Where is Miss Vivian?"

Brian's hands dropped to his sides. He kept his eyes fixed on the doctor's face as if he would read his very soul. And for the moment Doctor Muir could not meet that piercing gaze. He tried to pass on, but Brian laid his hand on his arm.

"Tell me all," he said. "What does my mother say? Has it killed her?"

"Killed her? People are not so easily killed by grief, my dear Mr. Brian," said the doctor. "Come away, come away. Your mother is not just herself, and speaks wildly, as mothers are wont to do when they lose their first-born son. We'll not mind

what she says just now. Where is Miss Vivian? It is she that I want to see."

"I understand," said Brian, taking away his hands from the doctor's arm and hiding his face with them, "my mother will not see me; she will not forgive my—my—accursed carelessness——"

"Worse than that!" muttered the doctor to himself, but, fortunately, Brian did not hear. And at that moment a slender woman's figure appeared at the end of the corridor; it hesitated, moved slowly forward, and then approached them hastily.

"Is Mrs. Luttrell ill?" asked Angela.

She had a candle in her hand, and the beams fell full upon her soft, white dress and the Eucharis lily in her hair. She had twisted a string of pearls three times round her neck—it was an heirloom of great value. The other ornaments were all Richard's gifts; two broad bands of gold set with pearls and diamonds upon her arms, and the diamond ring which had been the pledge of her betrothal. She was very pale, and her eyes were large with anxiety as she asked her question of the two men, whom her appearance had struck with dumbness. Brian turned away with a half-audible groan. Doctor Muir looked at her intently from beneath his shaggy, grey eyebrows, and did not speak.

"I know there is something wrong, or you would not stand like this outside Mrs. Luttrell's door," said Angela, with a quiver in her sweet voice. "And Richard is not here! Where is Richard?"

There was silence.

"Something has happened to Richard? Some accident—some——"

She stopped, looked at Brian's averted face, and shivered as if an icy wind had passed over her. Doctor Muir took the candle from her hand, then opened his lips to speak. But she stopped him. "Don't tell me," she said. "I am going to his mother. I shall learn it in a moment from her face. Besides—I know—I know."

The delicate tinting had left her cheeks and lips; her eyes were distended, her limbs trembled as she moved. Doctor Muir stood aside, giving her the benefit of keen professional scrutiny as she passed; but he was satisfied. She was not a woman who would either faint or scream in an emergency. She might suffer, but she would suffer in silence rather than add by word or deed one iota to the burden of suffering that another might have to bear. Therefore, Doctor Muir let her enter the room in which the widowed mother wept, and prayed in his heart that Angela Vivian might receive the news of her bereavement in a different spirit from that shown by Mrs. Luttrell.

The noise of shuffling feet, of muffled voices, of stifled sobs, reached the ears of the watchers in the corridor from another part of the house. Doctor Muir had sent a messenger to bid the men advance with their sad burden to a side door which opened into a sitting-room not very generally used. The housekeeper, an old and faithful servant of the family, had already prepared it, according to the doctor's orders, for the reception of the dead. The visitors hurriedly took their departure; Donald Grant's wagonette had been at the door some little time, and, as soon as he had seen poor Richard Luttrell's remains laid upon a long table in the sitting-room, he drove silently away, with Archie on the box-seat beside him, and the three girls in the seats behind, crying over the troubles of their friends.

Doctor Muir and Brian Luttrell remained for some time in the passage outside the study door. The doctor tried several times to persuade his companion to leave his post, but Brian refused to do so.

"I must wait; I must see my mother," he repeated, when the doctor pressed him to come away. "Oh, I know that she will not want to see me; she will never wish to look on my face again, but I must see her and remind her that—that—she has one son left—who loves her still." And then Brian's voice broke and he said no more. Doctor Muir shook his head. He did not believe that Mrs. Luttrell would be much comforted by his reminder. She had never seemed to love her second son.

"Where is Hugo?" the doctor asked, in an undertone, when the silence had lasted some time.

"I do not know."

"He will be home to-night?"

"I do not know."

All this time no sound had reached them from the interior of the room where the two women sat together. Their voices must have been very low, their sobs subdued. Angela had not cried out as Mrs. Luttrell had done when she received the fatal news. No movement, no sign of grief was to be heard.

Brian lifted up his grief-stricken eyes at last, and fixed them on the doctor's face.

"Are they dead?" he muttered, strangely. "Will they never speak again?"

Doctor Muir did not immediately reply. He had placed the candle on a wooden bracket in the wall, and its flickering beams lighted the dark corridor so feebly that until now he had scarcely caught a glimpse of the young man's haggard looks. They frightened him a little. He himself took life so easily—fretted so little against the inevitable—that he scarcely understood the

look of anguish which an hour or two of trouble had imprinted upon Brian Luttrell's face. It was the kind of sorrow which has been known to turn a man's hair from black to white in a single night.

"I will knock at the door, said the doctor. But before he could carry out his intention, footsteps were heard, and the handle of the door was turned. Both men drew back involuntarily into the shadow as Mrs. Luttrell and Angela came forth.

Angela had been weeping, but there were no signs of tears upon the elder woman's face. Rigid, white, and hard, it looked almost as if it were carved in stone; a mute image of misery too deep for tears. There were lines upon her brow that had never been seen there before; her lips were tightly compressed; her eyes fiercely bright. She had thrown a black shawl over her head on coming away from the drawing-room into the draughty corridors. This shawl, which she had forgotten to remove, together with the dead blackness of her dress, gave her pale face a strangely spectral appearance. Clinging to her, and yet guiding her, came Angela, with the white flower crushed and drooping from her hair. She also was ashy pale, but there was a more natural and tender look of grief to be read in her wet eyes and on her trembling lips than in the stony tranquility of Richard Luttrell's mother.

Brian could not contain himself. He rushed forward and threw himself on the ground at his mother's feet. Mrs. Luttrell shrank back a little and clutched Angela's arm fiercely with her thin, white fingers.

"Mother, speak to me; tell me that you—mother, only speak!"

His voice died away in irrepressible sobs which shook him from head to foot. He dared not utter the word "forgiveness" yet. Unintentional as the harm might be that his hand had done, it was sadly irreparable, too.

Mrs. Luttrell looked at him with scarcely a change of feature, and tried to withdraw some stray fold of her garments from his grasp. He resisted; he would not let her go. His heart was aching with his own trouble, and with the consciousness of her loss—Angela's loss—all the suffering that Richard's death would inflict upon these two women who had loved him so devotedly. He yearned for one little word of comfort and affection, which even in that terrible moment, a mother should have known so well how to give. But he lay at that mother's feet in vain.

It was Angela who spoke first.

"Speak to him, mother," she said, tremblingly. "See how he suffers. It was not his fault."

The tears ran down her pale cheeks unnoticed as she spoke. It

was only natural to Angela that her first words should be words of consolation to another, not of sorrow for her own great loss. But Mrs. Luttrell did not unclose her lips.

"Ye'll not be hard upon him, madam," said the old doctor, deprecatingly. "Your own lad, and a lad that kneels to you for a gentle word, and will be heartbroken if you say him nay."

"And is my heart not broken?" asked the mother, lifting her head and looking away into the darkness of the long corridor. "The son that I loved is dead; the boy that came to me like a little angel in the spring of my youth—they say that he is dead and cold. I am going to look at his face again. Come, Angela. Perhaps they have spoken falsely, and he is alive—not murdered, after all."

"Murdered? Mother!"

Brian raised himself a little and repeated the word with shuddering emphasis.

"Murdered!" said Mrs. Luttrell, steadily, as she turned her burning eyes full upon the countenance of her younger son, as if to watch the workings of his agitated features. "If not by the laws of man, by God's laws you are guilty. You had quarrelled with him that day; and you took your revenge. I tell you, James Muir, and you, Angela Vivian, that Brian Luttrell took his brother's life by no mistake—that he is Richard's murderer——"

"No; I swear it by the God who made me—no!" cried Brian, springing to his feet.

But his mother had turned away.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEAD MAN'S TESTIMONY.

About ten o'clock at night Hugo Luttrell was seen entering the courtyard at the back of the house, where keepers, grooms, and indoor servants were collected in a group, discussing in low tones the event of the day. Seeing these persons, he seemed inclined to go back by the way that he had come; but the butler—an old Englishman who had been in the Luttrell family before Edward Luttrell ever thought of marrying a Scotch heiress and settling for the greater part of every year at Netherglen—this said butler, whose name was William Whale, caught sight of the young fellow and accosted him by name.

"Mr. Hugo, sir, there's been many inquiries after you," he began in a lugubrious tone of voice.

"After me, William?" Hugo looked frightened and uneasy. "What for?"

"You won't have heard of the calamity that has come upon

the house," said William, shaking his head solemnly; "and it will be a great shock to you, no doubt, sir; a terrible shock. Stand back, you men, there; let Mr. Hugo pass. Come into the housekeeper's room, sir. There's a fire in it; the night has turned chilly. Go softly, if you please, sir."

Hugo followed the old man without another question. He looked haggard and wearied; his clothes were wet, torn and soiled; his very hair was damp, and his boots were soaked and burst as though from a long day's tramp. Mrs. Shairp, the housekeeper, with whom he was a favourite, uttered a startled exclamation at his appearance.

"Guid guide us, sirs! and whaur hae ye been hidin' yoursel' a' this day an' nicht, Mr. Hugo? We've haen sair trouble i' th' hoose, and naebody kent your whaurabouts. Bairn! but ye're just droukit! Whaur hae you hidden yoursel' then?"

"Hidden!" Hugo repeated, catching at one of the good woman's words and ignoring the others. "I've not hidden anywhere. I've been over the hills a bit—that's all. What is the matter?"

He seated himself in the old woman's cushioned chair, and leaned forward to warm himself at the fire as he spoke, holding out first one hand and then the other to the leaping blaze.

"How will I tell you?" said Mrs. Shairp, relapsing into the tears she had been shedding for the last two hours or more. "Is it possible that ye've heard naething ava? The laird—Netherglen himsel'—oor maister—and have you heard naething aboot him as you cam doun by the muir? I'd hae thocht shame to let you gang hame unkent, if I had been Jenny Burns at the lodge."

"I did not come that way," said Hugo, impatiently. "What is the matter with the laird?"

"Maitter?—maitter wi' the laird? The laird's deid, laddie, and a gude freend was he to me and mine, and to your ain sel' forbye, and the hale kintra side will be at the buryin'," said the housekeeper, shaking her head solemnly. "An' if that were na enow for my poor mistress there's a waur thing to follow. The laird's fa'en by his ain brither's han's. Mr. Brian shot him this verra nicht, as they cam' thro' the wud."

"By mistake, Mrs. Shairp, by mistake," murmured William Whale. But Hugo lifted his haggard face, which looked very pale in the glow of the firelight.

"You can't mean what you are saying," he said, in a hoarse, unnatural voice. "Richard? Richard—dead! Oh, it must be impossible!"

"True, sir, as gospel," said Mrs. Shairp, touched by the ring of pain that came into the young man's voice as he spoke. "At

half-past eight, by the clock, they brought the laird hame stiff and stark, cauld as a stane a'ready. The mistress is clean daft wi' sorrow; an' I doot but Mr. Brian will hae a sair time o't wi' her and the bonny young leddy that's left ahent."

Hugo dropped his face into his hands and did not answer. A shudder ran through his frame more than once. Mrs. Shairp thought that he was shedding tears, and motioned to William Whale, who had been standing near the door with a napkin over his arm, to leave the room. William retired shutting the door softly behind him.

Presently Hugo spoke. "Tell me about it," he said. And Mrs. Shairp was only too happy to pour into his ears the whole story as she had learned it from the keeper who had come upon the scene just after the firing of the fatal shot. He listened almost in silence, but did not uncover his face.

"And his mother?" he asked at length.

Mrs. Shairp could say little about the laird's mother. It was Dr. Muir who had told her the truth, she said, and the whole house had heard her cry out as if she had been struck. Then Miss Vivian had gone to her, and had received the news from Mrs. Luttrell's own lips. They had gone together to look at Richard's face, and then Miss Vivian had fainted, and had been carried into Mrs. Luttrell's own room, where she was to spend the night. So much Mrs. Shairp knew, and nothing more.

"And where is Brian?"

"Whaur should he be?" demanded the old woman, with some asperity. "Whaur but in's ain room, sair cast doun for the ill he has dune."

"It was not his fault," said Hugo, quickly.

"Maybe no," replied Mrs. Shairp, with reserve. "Maybe ay, maybe no; it's just the question—though I wadna like to think that the lad meant to harm his brother."

"Who does think so?"

"I'm no saying that onybody thinks sae. Mr. Brian was aye a kind-hearted lad an' a bonny, but never a lucky ane, sae lang as I hae kent him, which will be twenty years gane at Marti'mas. I cam' at the term."

Hugo scarcely listened to her. He rose up with a strange, scared look upon his face, and walked unsteadily out of the room, without a word of thanks to Mrs. Shairp for her communications. Before she had recovered from her astonishment, he was far down the corridor on his way to the other portion of the house.

In which room had they laid Richard Luttrell? Hugo remembered with a shiver that he had not asked. He glanced round

the hall with a thrill of nervous apprehension. The drawing-room and dining-room doors stood open; they were in darkness. The little morning-room door was also slightly ajar, but a dim light seemed to be burning inside. It must be in that room, Hugo decided, that Richard Luttrell lay. Should he go in? No, he dare not. He could not look upon Richard Luttrell's dead face. And yet he hesitated, drawn by a curious fascination towards that half-open door.

While he waited, the door was slowly opened from the inside, and a hand appeared clasping the edge of the door. A horrible fancy seized Hugo that Richard had risen from his bed and was coming out into the hall; that Richard's fingers were bent round the edge of the open door. He longed to fly, but his knees trembled; he could not move. He stood rooted to the spot with unreasoning terror, until the door opened still more widely, and the person who had been standing in the room came out. It was no ghostly Richard, sallying forth to upbraid Hugo for his misdeeds. It was Brian Luttrell who turned his pale face towards the boy as he passed through the hall.

Hugo cowered before him. He sank down on the lower steps of the wide staircase and hid his face in his hands. Brian, who had been passing him by without remark, seemed suddenly to recollect himself, and stopped short before his cousin. The lad's shrinking attitude touched him with pity.

"You are right to come back," he said, in a voice which, although abstracted, was strangely calm. "He told you to leave the house for ever, did he not? But I think that—now—he would rather that you stayed. He told me that I might do for you what I chose."

The lad's head was bent still lower. He did not say a word.

"So," said Brian, leaning against the great oak bannisters as if he were utterly exhausted by fatigue, "so—if you stay—you will only be doing—what, perhaps, he wishes now. You need not be afraid."

"You are the master—now," murmured Hugo from between his fingers.

It was the last speech that Brian would have expected to hear from his cousin's lips. It cut him to the heart.

"Don't say so!" he cried, in a stifled voice. "Good God! to think that I—I—should profit by my brother's death!" And Hugo, lifting up his head, saw that the young man's frame was shaken by shuddering horror from head to foot. "I shall never be master here," he said.

Hugo raised his head with a look of wonder. Brian's feeling was quite incomprehensible to him.

"He was always a good brother to me," Brian went on in a shaken voice, more to himself than to his cousin, "and a kind friend to you so long as you kept straight and did not disgrace us by your conduct. You had no right to complain, whatever he might do or say to you. You ought to mourn for him—you ought to regret him bitterly—bitterly—while I—I——"

"Do not you mourn for him, then?" said Hugo, when the pause that followed Brian's speech had become insupportable to him.

"If I were only in his place I should be happy," said Brian, passionately. Then he turned upon Hugo with something like fierceness, but it was the fierceness of a prolonged and half-suppressed agony of pain. "Do you feel nothing? Do you come into his house, knowing that he is dead, and have not a word of sorrow for your own behaviour to him while he lived? Come with me and look at him—look at his face and remember what he did for you when you were a boy—what he has done for you during the last eight years."

He seized Hugo by the arm and compelled him to rise; but the lad, with a face blanched by terror, absolutely refused to move from the spot.

"Not to-night—I can't—I can't!" he said, his dark eyes dilating, and his very lips turning white with fear. "To-morrow, Brian—not to-night."

But Brian briefly answered, "Come," and tightened his grasp on the lad's arm. And Hugo, though trembling like an aspen leaf, yielded to that iron pressure, and followed him to the room where lay all that was mortal of Richard Luttrell.

Once inside the door, Brian dropped his cousin's arm, and seemed to forget his presence. He slowly removed the covering from the dead face and placed a candle so that the light fell upon it. Then he walked to the foot of the table, which served the purpose of a bier, and looked long and earnestly at the marble features, so changed, so passionless and calm in the repose of death! Terrible, indeed, was the sight to one who had sincerely loved Richard Luttrell—the strong man, full of lusty health and vigour, desirous of life, fortunate in the possession of all that makes life worth living only a few short hours before; now silent, motionless for ever, struck down in the hey-day of youth and strength, and by a brother's hand! Brian had but spoken the truth when he said that he would gladly change his own fate for that of his brother Richard. He forgot Hugo and the reason for which he had brought him to that room, he forgot everything except his own unavailing sorrow, his inextinguishable regret.

Hugo remained where his cousin had left him, leaning against the wall, seemingly incapable of speech or motion, overcome by a superstitious terror of death, which Brian was as far from suspecting as of comprehending. In the utter silence of the house they could hear the distant stable-clock strike eleven. The wind was rising, and blew in fitful gusts, rustling the branches of the trees, and causing a loose rose-branch to tap carelessly against the window panes. It sounded like the knock of someone anxious to come in. The candles flickered and guttered in the draught; the wavering light cast strange shadows over the dead man's face. You might have thought that his features moved from time to time; that now he frowned at the intruders, and now he smiled at them—a terrible, ghastly smile.

There was a footstep at the door. It was Mrs. Luttrell who came gliding in with her pale face, and her long black robes, to take her place at her dead son's side. She had thought that she must come and assure herself once more that he was really gone from her. She meant to look at him for a little while, to kiss his cold forehead, and then to go back to Angela and try to sleep. She took no notice of Brian, nor of Hugo; she drew a chair close to the long table upon which the still, white form was stretched, seated herself, and looked steadfastly at the uncovered face. Brian started at the sight of his mother; he glanced at her pleadingly, as if he would have spoken; but the rigidity of her face repelled him. He hung his head and turned a little from her, as though to steal away.

Suddenly a terrible voice rang through the room. "Look!" cried the mother, pointing with one finger to the lifeless form, and raising her eyes for the first time to Brian's face—"look there!"

Brian looked, and flinched from the sight he saw. For a strange thing had happened. Although not actually unusual, it had never before come within the experience of any of these watchers of the dead, and thus it suggested to them nothing but the old superstition which in old times caused a supposed murderer to be brought face to face with the man he was accused of having killed.

A drop of blood was trickling from the nostril of the dead man, and losing itself in the thick, black moustache upon his upper lip. It was followed by another or two, and then it stayed.

The mother did not speak again. Her hand sank; her eyes were riveted upon Brian's face with a mute reproach. And Brian, although he knew well enough in his sober senses that the phenomenon they had just seen was merely caused by the breaking of some small blood-vessel in the brain, such as often

occurs after death, was so far dominated by the impression of the moment that he walked out of the room, not daring to justify himself in his mother's eyes, not daring to raise his head. After him crept Hugo, whose teeth chattered as though he were suffering from an ague; but Brian took no more notice of his cousin. He went straight to his own room and locked himself in, to bear his lonely sorrow as best he might.

No formal inquiry was made into the cause of Richard Luttrell's death. Archie Grant's testimony completely exonerated Brian, even of carelessness, and the general opinion was that no positive blame could be attached to anybody for the sad occurrence, and that Mr. Brian Luttrell had the full sympathy and respect of all who knew him and had known his lamented brother, Richard Luttrell of Netherglen.

So the matter ended. But idle tongues still wagged, and wise heads were shaken over the circumstances attending Richard Luttrell's death.

It was partly Mrs. Luttrell's fault. In the first hours of her bereavement she had spoken wildly and bitterly of the share which Brian had had in causing Richard's death. She had spoken to Doctor Muir, to Angela, to Mrs. Shairp—a few words only to each, but enough to show in what direction her thoughts were tending. With the first two her words were sacred, but Mrs. Shairp, though kindly enough, was not so trustworthy. Before the good woman realised what she was doing, the whole household, nay, the whole country-side, had learned that Mrs. Luttrell believed her second son to have fired that fatal shot with the intention of killing, or at least of maiming, his brother Richard.

The Grants, who had spent the day of the accident at Netherglen, were, of course, eagerly questioned by inquisitive acquaintances. The girls were ready enough to chatter. They confided to their intimate friends in mysterious whispers that the brothers had certainly not been on good terms; they had glowered at one another, and caught each other up and been positively rude to each other; and they would not go out together; and poor Mr. Luttrell looked so worried, so unlike himself! Then the brothers were interrogated, but proved less easy to "draw." Archie flew into a rage at the notion of sinister intentions on Brian's part. Donald looked "dour," and flatly refused to discuss the subject.

But his refusal was thought vastly suspicious by the many wiseacres who knew the business of everybody better than their own. And the rumour waxed and spread.

During the days before the funeral Brian scarcely saw anyone. He lived shut up in his own room, as his mother did in hers, and had interviews only with his lawyer and men who came on

business. It was a sad and melancholy house in those days. Angela was invisible: whether it was she or Mrs. Luttrell who was ill nobody could exactly say. Hugo wandered about the lonely rooms, or shut himself up after the fashion of the other members of the family, and looked like a ghost. After the first two days, Angela's only near relation, her brother Rupert, was present in the house; but his society seemed not to be very acceptable to Hugo, and, finding that he was of no use, even to his sister, Mr. Vivian went back to England, and the house seemed quieter than it had been before.

The funeral took place at last. When it was over, Brian came home, said farewell to the guests, had a long interview with Mr. Colquhoun, the solicitor, and then seated himself in the study with the air of a man who was resolved to take up the burden of his duties in a befitting spirit. His air was melancholy, but calm; he seemed aged by ten years since his brother's death. He dined with Hugo, Mr. Colquhoun and Dr. Muir, and exerted himself to talk of current topics with courtesy and interest. But his weary face, his saddened eyes, and the long pauses that occurred between his intervals of speech, produced a depressing effect upon his guests. Hugo was no more cheerful than his cousin. He watched Brian furtively from time to time, yet seemed afraid to meet his eye. His silence and depression were so marked that the doctor afterwards remarked it to Mr. Colquhoun. "I did not think that Mr. Hugo would take his cousin's death so much to heart," he said.

"Do you think he does?" asked Mr. Colquhoun, drily. "I don't believe he's got a heart, the young scamp. I found him myself in the wood, examining the bark of the tree near which the accident took place, you know, on the morning after Richard's death, as cool as a cucumber. 'I was trying to make out how it happened,' he said to me, when I came up. 'Brian must have shot very straight.' I told him to go home and mind his own business."

"Do you think what they say about Brian's intentions had any foundation?" asked the doctor.

"Not a bit. Brian's too tender-hearted for a thing of that sort. But the mother's very bitter about it. She's as hard as flint. It's a bad look out for Brian. He's a ruined man."

"Not from a pecuniary point of view. The property goes to him."

"Yes, but he hasn't the strength to put up with the slights and the scandal which will go with it. He has the pluck, but not the physique. It's men like him that go out of their minds, or commit suicide, or die of heart-break—which you doctors call by

some other name, of course—when the world's against them. He'll never stand it. Mark my words—Brian Luttrell won't be to the fore this time next year."

"Where will he be, Colquhoun? Come, come, Brian's a fellow with brains. He won't do anything rash."

"He'll be in his grave," said the lawyer, gloomily.

"He'll be enjoying himself in the metropolis," said the doctor. "He'll have a fine house and a pretty wife, and he'll laugh in our faces if we hint at your prophecies, Colquhoun. I should have had no respect at all for Brian Luttrell if he threw away his own life because he had accidentally taken that of another man."

"We shall see," said the lawyer.

CHAPTER VI.

MOTHER AND SON.

EARLY on the following morning Brian received a message from his mother. It was the first communication that she had vouchsafed to him since the day of her eldest son's death. "Would he come to her dressing-room at eleven o'clock? She wished to consult him upon special business." Brian sent word that he would be with her at that hour, and then fell into anxious meditation as he sat at breakfast, with Hugo at the other end of the table.

"Don't go far away from the house, Hugo," he said at last, as he rose to leave the room. "I may want you in the course of the morning."

Hugo looked up at him without answering. The lad had been studying a newspaper, with his head supported by his left hand, while his right played with his coffee cup or the morsels of food upon his plate. He did not seem to have much appetite. His great, dark eyes looked larger than usual, and were ringed with purple shadow; his lips were tremulous. "It was wonderful," as people said, "to see how that poor young fellow felt his cousin's death."

Perhaps Brian thought so too, for he added, very gently—though when did he not speak gently?—

"There is nothing wrong. I only want to make some arrangements with you for your future. Think a little about it before I speak to you."

And then he went out of the room, and Hugo was left to his meditations, which were not of the most agreeable character, in spite of Brian's reassuring words.

He pushed his plate and newspaper away from him impatiently; a frown showed itself on his beautiful, low brows.

"What will he do for me? Anything definite, I wonder? Poor beggar, I'm sorry for him, but my position has been decidedly improved since that unlucky shot at Richard. Did he want him out of the way, I wonder? The gloomy look with which he goes makes about one imagine that he did. What a fool he must be!"

Hugo pushed back his chair and rose; a cynical smile curled his lips for a moment, but it changed by degrees into an expression of somewhat sullen discontent.

"I wish I could sleep at nights," he said, moving slowly towards the window. "I've never been so wretchedly wakeful in all my life." Then he gazed out into the garden, but without seeing much of the scene that he gazed upon, for his thoughts were far away, and his whole soul was possessed by fear of what Brian would do or say.

At eleven o'clock Brian made his way to his mother's dressing-room, an apartment which, although bearing that name, was more like an ordinary sitting-room than a dressing-room. He knocked, and was answered by his mother's voice.

"Come in," she said. "Is it you, Brian?"

"Yes, it is I," Brian said, as he closed the door behind him.

He walked quietly to the hearthrug, where he stood with one hand resting on the mantelpiece. It was a convenient attitude, and one which exposed him to no rebuffs. He was too wise to offer hand or cheek to his mother by way of greeting.

Mrs. Luttrell was sitting on a sofa, with her back to the light. Brian thought that she looked older and more worn; there were fresh wrinkles upon her forehead, and marks of weeping and sleeplessness about her eyes, but her figure was erect as ever, as rigidly upright as if her backbone were made of iron. She was in the deepest possible mourning; even the handkerchief that she held in her hand was edged with two or three inches of black. Brian looked round for Angela; he had expected to find her with his mother, but she was not there. The door into Mrs. Luttrell's bed-room was partly open.

"How is Angela?" he asked.

"Angela is not well. Could you expect her to be well after the terrible trial that has overtaken her?"

Brian winced. He could make no reply to such a question. Mrs. Luttrell scored a triumph, and continued in her hard, incisive way:—

"She is probably as well as she can hope to be under the circumstances. Her health has suffered—as mine also has suffered—under the painful dispensation which has been meted out to us. We do not repine. Hearts that are broken, that have no hopes,

no joys, no pleasures in store for them in this life, are not eager to exhibit their sufferings. If I speak as I speak now, it is for the last and only time. It is right that you should hear me once."

"I will hear anything you choose to say," answered Brian, heavily. "But, mother, be merciful. I have suffered, too."

"We will pass over the amount of your suffering," said Mrs. Luttrell, "if you please. I have no doubt that it is very great, but I think that it will soon be assuaged. I think that you will soon begin to remember the many things that you gain by your brother's death—the social position, the assured income, the estate in Scotland which I brought to your father, as well as his own house of Netherglen—all the things for which men are only too ready to sell their souls."

"All these things are nothing to me," sighed Brian.

"They are a great deal in the world's eyes. You will soon find out how differently it receives you now from the way it received you a year—a month—a week—ago. You are a rich man. I wish you joy of your wealth. Everything goes to you except Netherglen itself; that is left in my hands."

"Mother, are you mad?" said her son, passionately. "Why do you talk to me in this way? I swear to you that I would give every hope and every joy that I ever possessed—I would give my life—to have Richard back again! Do you think I ever wanted to be rich through his death?"

"I do not know what you wanted," said Mrs. Luttrell, sternly. "I have no means of guessing."

"Is this what you wished me to say?" said Brian, whose voice was hoarse and changed. "I said that I would listen—but you might spare me these taunts, at least."

"I do not taunt you. I wish only to draw attention to the difference between your position and my own. Richard's death brings wealth, ease, comfort to you; to me nothing but desolation. I am willing to allow the house of which I have been the mistress for so many years, of which I am legally the mistress still, to pass into your hands. I have lost my home as well as my sons. I am desolate."

"Your sons! You have not lost both your sons, mother," pleaded Brian, with a note of bitter pain in his voice, as he came closer to her and tried in vain to take her icy hand. "Why do you think that you are no longer mistress of this house? You are as much mistress as you were in my father's time—in Richard's time. Why should there be a difference now?"

"There is this difference," said Mrs. Luttrell, coldly, "that I do not care to live in any house with you. It would be painful to me; that is all. If you desire to stay, I will go."

Brian staggered back as if she had struck him in the face.

"Do you mean to cast me off?" he almost whispered, for he could not find strength to speak aloud. "Am I not your son, too?"

"You fill the place that a son should occupy," said Mrs. Luttrell, letting her hand rise and fall upon her lap, and looking away from Brian. "I can say no more. My son—my own son—the son that I loved"—(she paused, and seemed to recollect herself before she continued in a lower voice)—"the son that I loved—is dead."

There was a silence. Brian seated himself and bowed his head upon his hands. "God help me!" she heard him mutter. But she did not relent.

Presently he looked up and fixed his haggard eyes upon her.

"Mother," he said, in hoarse and unnatural tones, "you have had your say; now let me have mine. I know too well what you believe. You think, because of a slight dispute which arose between us on that day, that I had some grudge against my brother. I solemnly declare to you that that is not true. Richard and I had differed; but we met—in the wood"—(he drew his breath painfully)—"a few minutes only before that terrible mistake of mine; and we were friends again. Mother, do you know me so ill as to think that I could ever have lifted my hand against Richard, who was always a friend to me, always far kinder than I deserved? It was a mistake—a mistake that I'll never, never forgive myself for, and that you, perhaps, never will forgive—but, at any rate, do me the justice to believe that it was a mistake, and not—not—that I was Richard's murderer!"

Mrs. Luttrell sat silent, motionless, her white hands crossed before her on the crape of her black gown. Brian threw himself impetuously on his knees before her and looked up into her face.

"Mother, mother!" he said, "do you not believe me?"

It seemed to him a long time—it was, in reality, not more than ten or twelve seconds—before Mrs. Luttrell answered his question. "Do you not believe me?" he had said. And she answered—

"No."

The shock of finding his passionate appeal so utterly disregarded restored to Brian the composure which had failed him before. He rose to his feet, pale, stricken, indeed, but calm. For a moment or two he averted his face from the woman who judged him so harshly, so pitilessly; but when he turned to her again, he had gained a certain pride of bearing which compelled her unwilling respect.

"If that is your final answer," he said, "I can say nothing

more. Perhaps the day will come when you will understand me better. In the meantime, I shall be glad to hear whether you have any plans which I can assist you in carrying out."

"None in which I require your assistance," said Mrs. Luttrell, stonily. "I have my jointure; I can live upon that. I will leave Netherglen to you. I will take a cottage for myself—and Angela."

"And Angela?"

"Angela remains with me. You may remember that she has no home, except with friends who are not always as kind to her as they might be. Her brother is not a wealthy man, and has no house of his own. Under these circumstances, and considering what she has lost, it would be mere justice if I offered her a home. Henceforth she is my daughter."

"You have asked her to stay, and she has consented?"

"I have."

"And you thought—you think—of taking a home for yourselves?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you do not object," said Brian, slowly, "to the gossip to which such a step on your part is sure to give rise?"

"I have not considered the matter. Gossip will not touch me."

"No." Brian would not for worlds have said that the step she contemplated taking would be disastrous for him. Yet for one moment he could not banish the consciousness that all the world would now have good reason to believe that his mother held him guilty of his brother's death. He did not know that the world suspected him already.

It was with an unmoved front that he presently continued.

"I, myself, had a proposition to make which would perhaps render it needless for you to leave Netherglen, which, as you say, is legally your own. You may not have considered that I am hardly likely to have much love for the place after what has occurred in it. You know that neither you nor I can sell any portion of the property—even you would not care to let it, I suppose, to strangers for the present. I think of going abroad—probably for some years. I have always wanted to travel. The house on the Strathleckie side of the property can be let; and as for Netherglen, it would be an advantage for the place if you made it your home for as many months in the year as you chose. I don't see why you should not do so. I shall not return to this neighbourhood."

"It does not seem to occur to you," said Mrs. Luttrell, in

measured tones, "that Angela and I may also have an objection to residing in a place which will henceforth have so many painful memories attached to it."

"If that is the case," said Brian, after a little pause, "there is no more to be said."

"I will ask Angela," said Mrs. Luttrell, stretching out her hand to a little handbell which stood upon the table at her side.

Brian started. "Then I will come to you again," he said, moving hastily to the door. "I will see you after lunch."

"Pray do not go," said his mother, giving two very decisive strokes of the bell by means of a pressure of her firm, white fingers. "Let us settle the matter while we are about it. There will be no need of a second interview."

"But Angela will not want to see me."

"Angela—— Ask Miss Vivian to come to me at once if she can" (to the maid who appeared at the door) — "Angela expressed a wish to see you this morning."

Brian stood erect by the mantelpiece, biting his lips under his soft, brown moustache, and very much disposed to take the matter into his own hands, and walk straight out of the room. But some time or other Angela must be faced; perhaps as well now as at any other time. He waited, therefore, in silence, until the door opened and Angela appeared.

"Brian!" said the soft voice, in as kind and sisterly a tone as he had ever heard from her.

"Brian!"

She was close to him, but he dared not look up until she took his unresisting hand in hers and held it tenderly. Then he raised his head a very little and looked at her.

She had always been pale, but now she was snow-white, and the extreme delicacy and even fragility of her appearance were thrown into strong relief by the dead black of her mourning gown. Her eyes were full of tears, and her lips were quivering; but Brian knew in a moment, by instinct, that she at least believed in the innocence of his heart, although his hand had taken his brother's life. He stooped down and kissed the hand that held his own, so humbly, so sorrowfully, that Angela's heart yearned over him. She understood him, and she had room, even in her great grief, to be sorry for him too. And when he withdrew his hand and turned away from her with one deep sob that he did not know how to repress, she tried to comfort him.

"Dear Brian," she said, "I know — I understand. Poor fellow! it is very hard for you. It is hard for us all; but I think it is hardest of all for you."

"I would have given my life for his, Angela," said Brian, in a smothered voice.

"I know you would. I know you loved him," said Angela, the tears streaming now down her pale cheeks. "There is only one thing for us to say, Brian—It was God's will that he should go."

"How you must hate the sight of me," groaned Brian. He had almost forgotten the presence of Mrs. Luttrell, whose hard, watchful eyes were taking notice of every detail of the scene.

"I will not trouble you long; I am going to leave Scotland; I will go far away; you shall never see my face again."

"But I should be sorry for that," said Angela's soft, caressing voice, into which a tremor stole from time to time that made it doubly sweet. "I shall want to see you again. Promise me that you will come back, Brian—some day."

"Some day?" he repeated, mournfully. "Well, some day, Angela, when you can look on me without so much pain as you must needs feel now, any day when you have need of me. But, as I am going so very soon, will you tell me yourself whether Netherglen is a place that you hold in utter abhorrence now? Would it hurt you to make Netherglen your home? Could you and my mother find happiness—or at least peace—if you lived here together? or would it be too great a trial for you to bear?"

"It rests with you to decide, Angela," said Mrs. Luttrell from her sofa. "I have no choice; it signifies little to me whether I go or stay. If it would pain you to live at Netherglen, say so; and we will choose another home."

"Pain me?" said Angela. "To stay here — in Richard's home?"

"Would you dislike it?" asked Mrs. Luttrell.

The girl came to her side, and put her arms round the mother's neck. Mrs. Luttrell's face softened curiously as she did so; she laid one of her hands upon Angela's shining hair with a caressing movement.

"Dislike it? It would be my only happiness," said Angela. She stopped, and then went on with soft vehemence — "To think that I was in his house, that I looked on the things that he used to see every day, that I could sometimes do the thing that he would have liked to see me doing—it is all I could wish for, all that life could give me now! Yes, yes, let us stay."

"It's perhaps not so good for you as one might wish," said Mrs. Luttrell, regarding her tenderly. "You had perhaps better have a change for a time; there is no reason why you should live for ever in the past, like an old woman, Angela. The day

will come when you may wish to make new ties for yourself—new interests——"

Angela's whisper reached her ear alone.

"'Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee,'" she murmured in the words of the widowed Moabitess, "'for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. . .'"

Mrs. Luttrell clasped her in her arms and kissed her forehead. Then after a little pause she said to Brian—

"We will stay."

Brian bowed his head.

"I will make all necessary arrangements with Mr. Colquhoun, and send him to you," he said. "I think there is nothing else about which we have to speak?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Luttrell, steadily.

"Except Hugo. As I am going away from home for so long, I think it would be better if I settled a certain sum in the Funds upon him, so that he might have a moderate income as well as his pay. Does that meet with your approval?"

"My approval matters very little, but you can do as you choose with your own money. I suppose you wish that this house should be kept open for him?"

"That is as you please. He would be better for a home. May I ask what Angela thinks?"

"Oh, yes," said Angela, lifting her face slowly from Mrs. Luttrell's shoulder. "He must not feel that he has lost a home, must he, mother?" She pronounced the title which Mrs. Luttrell had begged her to bestow, still with a certain diffidence and hesitancy; but Mrs. Luttrell's brow smoothed when she heard it.

"We will do what we can for him," she said.

"He has not been very steady of late," Brian went on slowly, wondering whether he was right to conceal Hugo's misdeeds and evil tendencies. "I hope he will improve; you will have patience with him if he is not very wise. And now, will you let me say good-bye to you? I shall leave Netherglen to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" said Angela, wonderingly. "Why should you go so soon?"

"It is better so," Brian answered.

"But we shall know where you are. You will write?"

His eyes sought his mother's face. She would not look at him. He spoke in an unnaturally quiet voice, "I do not know."

"Mother, will you not tell him to write to you?" said Angela.

The mother sat silent, unresponsive. It was plain that she cared for no letter from this son of hers.

"I will leave my address with Mr. Colquhoun, Angela, said Brian, forcing a slight, sad smile. "If there is business for me to transact, he will be able to let me know. I shall hear from him how you all are, from time to time."

"Will you not write to me, then?" said Angela.

Brian darted an inquiring glance at her. Oh, what divine pity, what sublime forgetfulness of self, gleamed out of those tender, tear-reddened eyes!

"Will you let me?" he said, almost timidly.

"I should like you to write. I shall look for your letters, Brian. Don't forget that I shall be anxious for news of you."

Almost without knowing what he did, he sank down on his knees before her, and touched her hand reverently with his lips. She bent forward and kissed his forehead as a sister might have done.

"God bless you, Angela!" he said. He could not utter another word.

"Mother," said the girl, taking in hers the passive hand of the woman, who had sat with face averted—perhaps so that she should not meet the eyes of the man whom she could not forgive —"mother, speak to him; say good-bye to him before he goes."

The mother's hand trembled and tried to withdraw itself, but Angela would not let it go.

"One kind word to him, mother," she said. "See, he is kneeling before you. Only look at him and you will see how he has suffered! Don't let him go away from you without one word.

She guided Mrs. Luttrell's hand to Brian's head; and there for a moment it rested heavily. Then she spoke.

"If I have been unjust, may God forgive me!" she said.

Then she withdrew her hand and rose from her seat. She did not even look behind her as she walked to the bed-room door, pushed it open, entered, and closed it, and turned the key in the old-fashioned lock. She had said all that she meant to say: no power, human or divine, should wrest another word from her just then. But in her heart she was crying over and over again the words that had been upon her lips a hundred times to say.

"He is no son of mine—no son of mine—this man by whose hand Richard Luttrell fell. I am childless. Both my sons are dead."

CHAPTER VII.

A FAREWELL.

THERE was a little, sunny, green walk opposite the dining-room windows, edged on either side by masses of white and crimson

phlox and a row of sunflowers, where the gentlemen of the house were in the habit of taking their morning stroll and smoking their first cigar. It was here that Hugo was slowly pacing up and down when Brian Luttrell came out of the house in search of him.

Hugo gave him a searching glance as he approached, and was not reassured. Brian's face wore a curiously restrained expression, which gave it a look of sternness. Hugo's heart beat fast; he threw away the end of his cigar, and advanced to meet his cousin with an air of unconcern which was evidently assumed for the occasion. It passed unremarked, however. Brian was in no mood for considering Hugo's expression of countenance.

They took two or three turns up and down the garden walk without uttering a word. Brian was absorbed in thought, and Hugo had his own reasons for being afraid to open his mouth. It was Brian who spoke at last.

"Come away from the house, he said. "I want to speak to you, and we can't talk easily underneath all these windows. We'll go down to the loch."

"Not to the loch," said Hugo, hastily.

Brian considered a moment. "You are right," he said, in a low tone, "we won't go there. Come this way." For the moment he had forgotten that painful scene at the boat-house, which no doubt made Hugo shrink sensitively from the sight of the place. He was sorry that he had suggested it.

The day was calm and mild, but not brilliant. The leaves of the trees had taken on an additional tinge of autumnal yellow and red since Brian last looked at them with an observant eye. For the past week he had thought of nothing but of the intolerable grief and pain that had come upon him. But now the peace and quiet of the day stole upon him unawares; there was a restfulness in the sight of the steadfast hills, of the waving trees—a sense of tranquility even in the fall of the yellowing leaves and the flight of the migrating song-birds overhead. His eye grew calmer, his brow more smooth, as he walked silently onward; he drew a long breath, almost like one of relief; then he stopped short, and leaned against the trunk of a tall fir tree, looking absently before him, as though he had forgotten the reason for his proposed interview with his cousin. Hugo grew impatient. They had left the garden, and were walking down a grassy little-trodden lane between two tracks of wooded ground; it led to the tiny hamlet at the head of the loch, and thence to the high road. Hugo wondered whether the conversation were to be held upon the public highway or in the lane. If it had to do with his own private affairs, he felt that he would

prefer the lane. But he dared not precipitate matters by speaking.

Brian recollected his purpose at last, however. After a short interval of silence he turned his eyes upon Hugo, who was standing near him, and said, gently—

"Sit down, won't you?—then we can talk."

There was a fallen log on the ground. Hugo took his seat on it meekly enough, but continued his former occupation of digging up, with the point of a stick that he was carrying, the roots of all the plants within his reach. He was so much absorbed by this pursuit that he seemed hardly to attend to the next words that Brian spoke.

"I ought, perhaps, to have had a talk with you before," he said. "Matters have been in a very unsettled state, as you well know. But there are one or two points that ought to be settled without delay."

Hugo ceased his work of destruction, and apparently disposed himself to listen.

"First, your own affairs. You have hitherto had an allowance, I believe—how much?"

"Two hundred," said Hugo, sulkily, since I joined."

"And your pay. And you could not make that sufficient?"

Hugo's face flushed; he did not answer. He sat still, looking sullenly at the ground. Brian waited for a little while, and then went on.

"I don't want to preach, old fellow: but you know I can't help thinking that, by a little decent care and forethought, you ought to have made that do. Still, it's no good my saying so, is it? What is done cannot be undone—would God it could!"

He stopped short again; his voice had grown hoarse. Hugo, with the dusky red still tingeing his delicate, dark face, hung his head and made no reply.

"One can but try to do better for the future," said Brian, somewhat unsteadily, after that moment's pause. "Hugo, dear boy, will you promise that, at least?"

He put his hand on his cousin's shoulder. Hugo tried to shrink away, then, finding this impossible, averted his face and partly hid it with his hands.

"It's no good making vague promises, he said by-and-bye. "What do you mean? If you want me to promise to live on my pay or anything of that sort——"

"Nothing of that sort," Brian interrupted him. "Only, that you will act honourably and straightforwardly—that you will not touch what is not your own——"

Hugo shook off the kindly hand and started up with something

like an oath upon his lips. "Why are you always talking about that affair? I thought it was past and done with," he said, turning his back upon his cousin, and switching the grass savagely with his cane.

"Always talking about it! Be reasonable, Hugo."

"It was only because I was at my wits' end for money," said the lad, irritably. "And that came in my way, and—I had never taken any before——"

"And never will again, said Brian. "That's what I want to hear you say."

But Hugo would say nothing. He stood, the impersonation of silent obstinacy, digging the end of his stick into the earth, or striking at the blue bells and the brambles within reach, resolved to utter no word which Brian could twist into any sort of promise for the future. He knew that his silence might injure his prospects, by lowering him in Brian's estimation—Brian being now the arbiter of his fate—but for all that he could not bring himself to make submission or to profess penitence. Something made the words stick in his throat; no power on earth would at that moment have forced him to speak.

"Well," said Brian at last, in a tone which showed deep disappointment, "I am sorry that you won't go so far, Hugo. I hope you will do well, however, without professions. Still, I should have been better satisfied to have your word for it—before I left Netherglen."

"Where are you going?" said Hugo, suddenly facing him.

"I don't quite know."

"To London?"

"No. Abroad."

"Abroad?" repeated Hugo, with a wondering accent. "Why should you go abroad?"

"That's my own business."

"But—but—" said the lad, flushing and paling, and stammering with eagerness, "I thought that you would stay here, and that Netherglen and everything would belong to you, and—and——"

"And that I should shoot, and fish, and ride, and disport myself gaily over my brother's inheritance—that my own hand deprived him of!" cried Brian, with angry bitterness. "It is so likely! Is it you who have no feeling, or do you fancy that I have none?"

"But the place is yours," faltered Hugo, with a guilty look. "Strathleckie is yours, if Netherglen is not."

"Mine! Yes, it is mine after a fashion," said Brian, while a hot, red flush crept up to his forehead, and his brows contracted painfully over his sad, dark eyes. "It is mine by law; mine by my father's will; and if it had come into my hands by any other

way—if my brother had not died through my own carelessness—I suppose that I might have learnt to enjoy it like any other man. But as it is—I wish that every acre of it were at the bottom of the loch, and I there, too, for the matter of that! I have made up my mind that I will not benefit by Richard's death. Others may have the use of his wealth, but I am the last that should touch it. I will have the two or three hundred a-year that he used to give me, and I will have nothing more."

Hugo's face had grown pale. He looked more dismayed by this utterance than by anything that Brian as yet had said. He opened his lips once or twice before he could find his voice, and it was in curiously rough and broken tones that he at length asked a question.

"Is this because of what people say about—about you—and—Richard?"

He seemed to find it difficult to pronounce the dead man's name. Brian lifted up his face.

"What do people say about me and Richard, then?" he said.

Hugo retreated a little.

"If you don't know," he said, looking down miserably, "I can't tell you."

Brian's eyes blazed with sudden wrath.

"You have said too little or too much," he said. "I must know the rest. What is it that people say?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, I do not know. Out with it."

"I can't tell you," said Hugo, biting his lips. "Don't ask me, ask someone else. Anyone."

"Is 'anyone' sure to know? I will hear it from you, and from no one else. What do people say?"

Hugo looked up at him and then down again. The struggle that was waging between the powers of good and evil in his soul had its effect even on his outer man. His very lips turned white as he considered what he should say.

Brian noted this change of colour, and was moved by it, thinking that he understood Hugo's reluctance to give him pain. He subdued his own impatience, and spoke in a lower, quieter voice.

"Don't take it to heart, Hugo, whatever it may be. It cannot be worse than the thing I have heard already—from my mother. I don't suppose I shall mind it much. They say, perhaps, that I—that I shot my brother"—(in spite of himself, Brian's voice trembled with passionate indignation)—"that I killed Richard purposely—knowing what I did—in order to possess myself of this miserable estate of his—is that what they say?"

Hugo answered by a bare little monosyllable—

"Yes."

"And who says this?"

"Everyone. The whole country-side."

"Then—if this is believed so generally—why have no steps been taken to prove my guilt? Good God, my guilt! Why should I not be prosecuted at once for murder?"

"There would be no evidence, they say," Hugo murmured, uneasily. "It is simply a matter of assertion; you say you shot at a bird, not seeing him, and they say that you must have known that he was there. That is all."

"A matter of assertion! Well, they are right so far. If they don't believe my word, there is no more to be said," replied Brian, sadly, his excitement suddenly forsaking him. "Only I never thought that my word would even be asked for on such a subject by people who had known me all my life. You don't doubt me, do you, Hugo?"

"How could I?" said Hugo, in a voice so low and shaken that Brian could scarcely hear the words. But he felt instinctively that the lad's trust in him, on that one point, at least, had not wavered, and with a warm thrill of affection and gratitude he held out his hand. It gave him a rude shock to see that Hugo drew back and would not take it.

"What! you don't trust me after all?" he said, quickly.

"I—I do," cried Hugo, "but—what does it matter what I think? I'm not fit to take your hand—I cannot—I cannot——"

His emotion was so genuine that Brian felt some surprise, and also some compunction for having distrusted him before.

"Dear Hugo," he said, gently, "I shall know you better now. We have always been friends; don't forget that we are friends still, although I may be on the other side of the world. I'm going to try and lose myself in some out-of-the-way place, and live where nobody will ever know my story, but I shall be rather glad to think sometimes that, at any rate, you understand what I felt about poor Richard—that you never once misjudged me—I won't forget it, Hugo, I assure you."

He pressed Hugo's still reluctant hand, and then made him sit down beside him upon the fallen tree.

"We must talk business now," he said, more cheerfully—though it was a sad kind of cheerfulness after all—"for we have not much time left. I hear the luncheon-bell already. Shall we finish our talk first? You don't care for luncheon? No more do I. Where had we got to? Only to the initial step—that I was going abroad. I have several other things to explain to you.

His eyes looked out into the distance as he spoke; his voice

lost its forced cheerfulness, and became immeasurably grave and sad. Hugo listened with hidden face. He did not care to turn his gloomy brows and anxiously-twitching lips towards the speaker.

"I shall never come back to Scotland, said Brian, slowly. "To England I may come some day, but it will be after many years. My mother has the management of Strathleckie, as well as of Netherglen, which belongs to her. She will live here, and use the house and dispose of the revenues as she pleases. Angela remains with her."

"But if you marry——"

"I shall never marry. My life is spoilt—ruined. I could not ask any woman to share it with me. I shall be a wanderer on the face of the earth—like Cain."

"No, no!" cried Hugo, passionately. "Not like Cain. There is no curse on you——"

"Not even my mother's curse? I am not sure, said Brian. "I shall be a wanderer, at any rate; so much is certain: living on my three hundred a year, very comfortably, no doubt; until this life is over, and I come out clear on the other side——"

Hugo lifted his face. "You don't mean," he whispered, with a look of terrified suspicion, "that you would ever lay hands on yourself, and shorten your life in that way?"

"Why, no. What makes you think that I should choose such a course? I hope I am not a coward," said Brian, simply. "No, I shall live out my days somewhere—somehow; but there is no harm in wishing that they were over."

There was a pause. The dreamy expression of Brian's eyes seemed to betoken that his thoughts were far away. Hugo moved his stick nervously through the grass at his feet. He could not look up.

"What else have you to tell me?" he said at last.

"Do you know the way in which Strathleckie was settled?" said Brian, quietly, coming down to earth from some high vision of other worlds and other lives than ours. "Do you know that my grandfather made a curious will about it?"

"No," said Hugo. It was false, for he knew the terms of the will quite well; but he thought it more becoming to profess ignorance.

"This place belonged to my mother's father. It was left to her children and their direct heirs; failing heirs, it reverts to a member of her family, a man of the name of Gordon Murray. We have no power to alienate any portion of it. The rents are ours, the house and lands are ours, for our lives only. If we die, you see, without children, the property goes to these Murrays."

Cousins of yours, are they?"

"Second cousins. I have never troubled myself about the exact degree of relationship until within the last day or two. I find that Gordon Murray would be my second cousin once removed, and that his child or children—he has more than one, I believe—would, therefore, be my third cousins. A little while ago I should have thought it highly improbable that any of the Gordon Murrays would ever come into possession of Strathleckie, but it is not at all improbable now."

"Where do these Murrays live?"

"In London, I think. I am not sure. I have asked Colquhoun to find out all that he can about them. If there is a young fellow in the family, it might be well to let him know his prospects and invite him down. I could settle an income on him if he were poor. Then the estate would benefit somebody."

"You can do as you like with the income," said Hugo.

The words escaped him half against his will. He stole a glance at Brian when they were uttered, as if anxious to ascertain whether or no his cousin had divined his own grudging, envious thoughts. He heartily wished that Richard's money had come to him. In Brian's place it would never have crossed his mind that he should throw away the good fortune that had fallen to his lot. If only he were in this lucky young Murray's shoes!

Brian did not guess the thoughts that passed through Hugo's mind, but that murmured speech reminded him of another point which he wished to make quite clear.

"Yes, I can do what I like with the income," he said, "and also with a sum of money that my father invested many years ago which nobody has touched at present. There are twelve thousand pounds in the Funds, part of which I propose to settle upon, you so as to make you more independent of my help in the future."

Hugo stammered out something a little incoherent; it was a proposition which took him completely by surprise. Brian continued quietly—

"Of course, I might continue the allowance that you have had hitherto, but then, in the event of my death, it would cease, for I cannot leave it to you by will. I have thought that it would be better, therefore, to transfer to you six thousand pounds, Hugo, over which you have complete control. All I ask is that you won't squander it. Colquhoun says that he can safely get you five per cent. for it. I would put it in his hands, if I were you. It will then bring you in three hundred a year."

"Brian, you are too good to me," said Hugo. There were tears

in his eyes; his voice trembled and his cheek flushed as he spoke "You don't know——"

Then he stopped and covered his face with his hands. A very unwonted feeling of shame and regret overpowered him; it was as much as he could do to refrain from crying like a child. "I can't thank you," he said, with a sob which made Brian smile a little, and lay his hand affectionately on his shoulder.

"Don't thank me, dear boy," he said. "It's very little to do for you; but it will perhaps help to keep you out of difficulties. And if you are in any trouble, go to Colquhoun. I will tell him how far he may go on helping you, and you can trust him. He shall not even tell me what you say to him, if you don't wish me to know. But, for Heaven's sake, Hugo, try to keep straight, and bring no disgrace upon our name. I have done what I could for you—I may do more, if necessary; but there are circumstances in which I should not be able to help you at all, and you know what those are."

He thought that he understood Hugo's impulsive disposition, but even he was not prepared for the burst of passionate remorse and affection with which the boy threw himself almost at his feet, kissing his hands and sobbing out promises of amendment with all the abandonment of his Southern nature. Brian was inclined to be displeased with this want of self-control; he spoke sharply at last, and told him to command himself. But some time elapsed before Hugo regained his calmness. And when Brian returned to the house, he could not induce his cousin to return with him; the young fellow wandered away through the woods with drooping head and dejected mien, and was seen no more till late at night.

He came back to the house too late to say good-bye to Brian, who had left a few lines of farewell for him. His absence, perhaps, added a pang to the keen pain with which Brian left his home; but if so, no trace of it was discernible in the kindly words which he had addressed to his cousin. He saw neither his mother nor Angela before he went; indeed, he avoided any formal parting from the household in general, and let it be thought that he was likely to return in a short time. But as he took from his groom the reins of the dog-cart in which he was about to drive down to the station, he looked round him sadly and lingeringly, with a firm conviction at his heart that never again would his eyes rest upon the shining loch, the purple hills, and the ivy-grown, grey walls of Netherglen. Never again. He had said his last farewell. He had no home now!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN GOWER-STREET.

ANGELA VIVIAN'S brother Rupert was, perhaps, not unlike her in feature and colouring, but there was a curious dissimilarity of expression between the two. Angela's dark, grey eyes had a sweetness in which Rupert's were lacking; the straight, regular features, which with her were brightened by a tender play of emotion, were, with him, cold and grave. The mouth was a fastidious one; the bearing of the man, though full of distinction, could sometimes be almost repellantly haughty. The merest sketch of him would not be complete unless we added that his dress was faultless, and that he was apt to bestow a somewhat finical care upon the minor details of his toilet.

It was in October, when "everybody" was still supposed to be out of town, that Rupert Vivian walked composedly down Gower-street meditating on the news which the latest post had brought him. In sheer absence of mind he almost passed the house at which he had been intending to call, and he stood for a minute or two upon the steps, as if not quite sure whether or no he would enter. Finally, however, he knocked at the door and rang the bell, then prepared himself, with a resigned air, to wait until it should be opened. He had never yet found that a first summons gained him admittance to that house.

After waiting five minutes and knocking twice, a slatternly maid appeared and asked him to walk upstairs. Rupert followed her leisurely; he knew very well what sort of reception to expect, and was not surprised when she merely opened the drawing-room door, and left him to announce himself. "No ceremony" was the rule in the Herons' household, and very objectionable Rupert Vivian sometimes found it.

The day had been foggy and dark, and a bright fire threw a cheerful light over the scene which presented itself to Rupert's eyes. A pleasant clinking of spoons and cups and saucers met his ear. He stood at the door for a moment unobserved, listening and looking on. He was a privileged person in that house, and considered himself quite at liberty to look and listen if he chose.

The room had an air of comfort verging upon luxury, but it was untidy to a degree which Rupert thought disgraceful. For the rich hues of the curtains, the artistic character of the Japanese screens and Oriental embroideries, the exquisite landscape-paintings on the walls, were compatible with grave deficiencies in the list of more ordinary articles of furniture. There were two or three picturesque, high-backed chairs, made of rosewood (black with age) and embossed leather, but the rest of the seats

consisted of divans, improvised by ingenious fingers out of packing-boxes and cushions covered with Morris chintzes; or brown Windsor chairs, evidently imported straight from the kitchen. A battered old writing-desk had an incongruous look when placed next to a costly buhl clock on a table, inlaid indeed with mother-of-pearl, but wanting in one leg; and some valuable blue china was apt to pass unobserved upon the mantelpiece because it was generally found in company with a child's mug, a plate of crusts, or a painting-rag. A grand piano stood open, and was strewn with sheets of music; two sketching portfolios conspicuously adorned the hearthrug. A tea-table was drawn up near the fire, and the firelight was reflected pleasantly in the gleaming silver and porcelain of the tea-service.

The human elements of the scene were very diverse. Mrs. Heron, a languid-looking, fair-haired woman, lay at full length on one of the divans. Her step-daughter, Kitty, sat at the tea-table, and Kitty's elder brother, Percival, a tall, broad-shouldered young man of eight-and-twenty, was leaning against the mantelpiece. A girl, who looked about twenty-one years of age, was sitting in the deepest shadow of the room. The fire-light played upon her hands, which lay quietly folded before her in her lap, but it did not touch her face. Two or three children were playing about the floor with their toys and a white fox-terrier. The young man was talking very fast, two at least of the ladies were laughing, the children were squabbling and shouting. It was a Babel. As Rupert stood at the door he caught the sense of Percival's last rapid sentences.

"No right nor wrong in the case. You must allow me to say that you take an exclusively feminine view of the matter, which, of course, is narrow. I have as much right to sell my brains to the highest bidder as my friend Vivian has to sell his pictures when he gets the chance—which isn't often."

"There is nothing like the candour of an impartial friend," said Rupert, good-humouredly, as he advanced into the room. "Allow me to tell you that I sold my last painting this morning. How do you do, Mrs. Heron?"

His appearance produced a lull in the storm. Percival ceased to talk and looked slightly—very slightly—disconcerted. Mrs. Heron half rose; Kitty made a raid upon the children's toys, and carried some of them to the other end of the room, whither the tribe followed her, lamenting. Then Percival laughed aloud.

"Where did you come from?" he said, in a round, mellow, genial voice, which was singularly pleasant to the ear. "'Listeners hear no good of themselves.' You've proved the proverb."

"Not for the first time when you are the speaker. have found that out. How are you, Kitty? Good evening, Miss Murray.

"How good of you to come to see us, Mr. Vivian!" said Mrs. Heron, in a low, sweetly-modulated voice, as she held out one long, white hand to her visitor. She re-arranged her draperies a little, and lay back gracefully when she had spoken. Rupert had never seen her do anything but lie on sofas in graceful attitudes since he first made her acquaintance. It was her *métier*. Nobody expected anything else from her except vague, theoretic talk, which she called philosophy. She had been Kitty's governess in days gone by. Mr. Heron, an artist of some repute, married her when he had been a widower for twelve months only. Since that time she had become the mother of three handsome, but decidedly noisy, children, and had lapsed by degrees into the life of a useless, fine lady, to whom household cares and the duties of a mother were mere drudgery, and were left to fall as much as possible on the shoulders of other people. Nevertheless, Mrs. Heron's selfishness was of a gentle and even loveable type. She was seldom out of humour, rarely worried or fretful; she was only persistently idle, and determined to consider herself in feeble health.

Vivian's acquaintance with the Herons dated from his first arrival in London, six years ago, when he boarded with them for a few months. The disorder of the household had proved too great a trial to his fastidious tastes to be borne for a longer space of time. He had, however, formed a firm friendship with the whole family, especially with Percival; and for the last three or four years the two young men had occupied rooms in the same house and virtually lived together. To anyone who knew the characters of the friends, their friendship was somewhat remarkable. Vivian's fault was an excess of polish and refinement; he attached unusual value to matters of mere taste and culture. Possibly this was the link which really attached him to Percival Heron, who was a man of considerable intellectual power, although possessed sometimes by a sort of irrepressible brusqueness and roughness of manner, with which he could make himself exceedingly disagreeable even to his friends. Percival was taller, stronger, broader about the shoulders, deeper in the chest, than Vivian—in fact, a handsomer man in all respects. Well-cut features, pale, but healthy-looking; brilliant, restless, dark eyes; thick brown hair and moustache; a well-knit, vigorous frame, which gave no sign as yet of the stoutness to which it inclined in later years, these were points that made his appearance undeniably striking and attractive. A physiognomist might,

however, have found something to blame as well as to praise in his features. There was an ominous upright line between the dark brows, which surely told of a variable temper; the curl of the laughing lips, and the fall of the heavy moustache only half concealed a curious over-sensitiveness in the lines of the too mobile mouth. It was not the face of a great thinker nor of a great saint, but of a humorous, quick-witted, impatient man, of wide intelligence, and very irritable nervous organisation.

The air of genial hilarity which he could sometimes wear was doubtless attractive to a man of Vivian's reserved temperament. Percival's features beamed with good humour—he laughed with his whole heart when anything amused him. Vivian used to look at him in wonder sometimes, and think that Percival was more like a great overgrown boy than a man of eight-and-twenty. On the other hand, Percival said that Vivian was a prig.

Kitty, sitting at the tea-table, did not think so. She loved her brother very much, but she considered Mr. Vivian a hero, a demi-god, something a little lower, perhaps, than the angels, but not very much. Kitty was only sixteen, which accounts, possibly, for her delusion on this subject. She was slim, and round, and white, with none of the usual awkwardness of her age about her. She had a well-set, graceful little head, and small, piquant features; her complexion had not much colour, but her pretty lips showed the smallest and pearliest of teeth when she smiled. and her dark eyes sparkled and danced under the thin, dark curve of her eyebrows and the shade of her long, curling lashes. Then her hair would not on any account lie straight, but disposed itself in dainty tendrils and love-locks over her forehead, which gave her almost a childish look, and was a serious trouble to Miss Kitty herself, who preferred her stepmother's abundant flaxen plaits, and did not know the charm that those soft rings of curling hair lent to her irregular, little face.

Vivian took a cup of tea from her with an indulgent smile, He liked Kitty extremely well. He lent her books sometimes, which she did not always read. I am afraid that he tried to form her mind. Kitty had a mind of her own, which did not want forming. Perhaps Percival Heron was right when he said that Vivian was a prig. He certainly liked to lecture Kitty; and she used to look up at him with great, grave eyes when he was lecturing, and pretend to understand what he was saying. She very often did not understand a word; but Rupert never suspected that. He thought that Kitty was a very simple-minded little person.

"There was quite an argument going on when you appeared, Mr. Vivian," said Mrs. Heron, languidly. "It is sometimes a

most difficult matter to decide what is right and what is wrong. I think you must decide for us."

"I am not skilled in casuistry, said Vivian, smiling. "Is Percival giving forth some of his heresies?"

"I was never less heretical in my life," cried Percival. "State your case, Bess; I'll give you the precedence."

Vivian turned towards the dark corner.

"It is Miss Murray's difficulty, is it?" he said, with a look of some interest. "I shall be glad to hear it."

The girl in the dark corner stirred a little uneasily, but she spoke with no trepidation of manner, and her voice was clear and cool.

"The question," she said, "is whether a man may write articles in a daily paper, advocating views which are not his own, simply because they are the views of the editor. I call it dishonesty."

"So do I," said Kitty, warmly.

"Dishonesty? Not a bit of it," rejoined Percival. "The writer is the mouthpiece of the paper, which advocates certain views; he sinks his individuality; he does not profess to explain his own opinions. Besides, after all, what is dishonesty? Why should people erect honesty into such a great virtue? It is like truth-telling and—peaches; nobody wants them out of their proper season; they are never good when they are forced."

"I don't see any analogy between truth-telling and peaches,' said the calm voice from the corner.

"You tell the truth all the year round, don't you, Bess?" said Kitty, with a little malice.

"But we are mortal, and don't attempt to practice exotic virtues," said Percival, mockingly. "I see no reason why I should not flourish upon what is called dishonesty, just as I see no reason why I should not tell lies. It is only the diseased sensibility of modern times which condemns either."

"Modern times?" said Vivian. "I have heard of a commandment——"

"Good Heavens!" said Percival, throwing back his handsome head, "Vivian is going to be didactic! I think this conversation has lasted quite long enough. Elizabeth, consider yourself worsted in the argument, and contest the point no longer."

"There has been no argument," said Elizabeth. "There has been assertion on your part, and indignation on ours; that is all."

"Then am I to consider myself worsted?" asked Percival. But he got no answer. Presently, however, he burst out with renewed vigour.

"Right and wrong! What does it mean? I hate the very sound of the words. What is right to me is wrong to you, and

vice versa. It's all a matter of convention. 'Now, who shall arbitrate?' as Browning says—

> 'Now, who shall arbitrate?
> Ten men love what I hate,
> Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;
> Ten, who in ears and eyes
> Match me; we all surmise,
> They, this thing, and I, that; whom shall my soul believe?'"

The lines rang out boldly upon the listeners' ears. Percival was one of the few men who can venture to recite poetry without making themselves ridiculous. He continued hotly—

"There is neither truth nor falsehood in the world, and those who aver that there is are either impostors or dupes."

"Ah," said Vivian, "you remind me of Bacon's celebrated sentence—'Many there be that say with jesting Pilate, What is truth? but do not wait for an answer.'"

"I think you have both quoted quite enough, said Kitty, lightly. "You forget how little I understand of these deep subjects. I don't know how it is, but Percival always says the things most calculated to annoy people; he never visits papa's studio without abusing modern art, or meets a doctor without sneering at the medical profession, or loses an opportunity of telling Elizabeth, who loves truth for its own sake, that he enjoys trickery and falsehood, and thinks it clever to tell lies."

"Very well put, Kitty," said Percival, approvingly. "You have hit off your brother's amiable character to the life. Like the child in the story, I could never tell why people loved me so, but now I know."

There was a general laugh, and also a discordant clatter at the other end of the room, where the children, hitherto unnoticed, had come to blows over a broken toy.

"What a noise they make!" said Percival, with a frown.

"Perhaps they had better go away," murmured Mrs. Heron, gently. "Dear Lizzy, will you look after them a little? They are always good with you."

The girl rose and went silently towards the three children, who at once clustered round her to pour their woes into her ear. She bent down and spoke to them lovingly, as it seemed, and finally quitted the room with one child clinging round her neck, and the others hanging to her gown. Percival gave vent to a sudden, impatient sigh.

"Miss Murray is fond of children, said Vivian, looking after her pleasantly.

"And I am not, snapped Kitty, with something of her brother's love of opposition in her tone, "I hate children."

"You! You are only a child yourself," said he, turning towards her with a kindly look in his grave eyes, and an unwonted smile. But Kitty's wrath was appeased by neither look nor smile.

"Then I had better join my compeers, she said, tartly. "I shall at least get the benefit of Elizabeth's affection for children."

Vivian's chair was close to hers, and the tea-table partly hid them from Percival's lynx eyes. Mrs. Heron was half asleep. So there was nothing to hinder Mr. Rupert Vivian from putting out his hand and taking Kitty's soft fingers for a moment soothingly in his own. He did not mean anything but an elderly-brotherly, patronising sort of affection by it; but Kitty was "thrilled through every nerve" by that tender pressure, and sat mute as a mouse, while Vivian turned to her step-mother and began to speak.

"I had some news this morning of my sister," he said. "You heard of the sad termination to her engagement?"

"No; what was that?"

"She was to be married before Christmas to a Mr. Luttrell; but Mr. Luttrell was killed a short time ago by a shot from his brother's gun when they were out shooting together."

"How very sad!"

"The brother has gone—or is going—abroad; report says that he takes the matter very much to heart. And Angela is going to live with Mrs. Luttrell, the mother of these two men. I thought these details might be interesting to you," said Vivian, looking round half-questioningly, "because I understand that the Luttrells are related to your young friend—or cousin—Miss Murray."

"Indeed? I never heard her mention the name," said Mrs. Heron.

Vivian thought of something that he had recently heard in connection with Miss Murray and the Luttrell family, and wondered whether she knew that if Brian Luttrell died unmarried she would succeed to a great Scotch estate. But he said nothing more.

"Where is Elizabeth?" said Percival, restlessly. "She is a great deal too much with these children—they drag the very life out of her. I shall go and find her."

He marched away, noting as he went, with much dissatisfaction, that Mrs. Heron was inviting Vivian to dinner, and that he was accepting the invitation.

He went to the top of the house, where he knew that a room was appropriated to the use of the younger children. Here he found Elizabeth for once without the three little Herons. She

was standing in the middle of the room, engaged in the prosaic occupation of folding up a table-cloth.

He stood in the doorway looking at her for a minute or two before he spoke. She was a tall girl, with fine shoulders, and beautiful arms and hands. He noticed them particularly as she held up the cloth, shook it out, and folded it. A clear, fine-grained skin, with a colour like that of a June rose in her cheeks, well-opened, calm-looking, grey-blue eyes, a mass of golden hair, almost too heavy for her head; a well-cut profile, and rather stately bearing, made Elizabeth Murray a noticeable person even amongst women more strictly beautiful than herself. She was poorly and plainly dressed, but poverty and plainness became her, throwing into strong relief the beauty of her rose-tints and finely-moulded figure. She did not start when she saw Percival at the door; she smiled at him frankly, and asked why he had come.

"Do you know anything of the Luttrells?" he asked, abruptly.

"The Luttrells of Netherglen? They are my third cousins."

"You never speak of them."

"I never saw them.'

"Do you know what has happened to one of them.

"Yes. He shot his brother by mistake a few days ago."

"I was thinking rather of the one who was killed," said Percival. "Where did you see the account? In the newspaper?"

"Yes." Then she hesitated a little. "And I had a letter. too."

"From the Luttrells themselves?"

"From their lawyer."

"And you held your tongue about it?"

"There was nothing to say," said Elizabeth, with a smile.

Percival shrugged his shoulders, and went back to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER IX.

ELIZABETH'S WOOING.

PERCIVAL and his friend dined with the Herons that evening. Mr. Heron was an artist by profession; he was a fair, abstracted-looking man, with gold eye-glasses, which he was always sticking ineffectually upon the bridge of his nose and nervously feeling for when they tumbled down again. He had painted several good pictures in his time, and was in the habit of earning a fairly good income; but owing to some want of management, either on his part or his wife's, his income never seemed quite large enough for the needs of the household. The servants' wages were usually

in arrear; the fittings of the house were broken and never repaired; there were wonderful gaps in the furniture and the china, which nobody ever appeared to think of filling up. Rupert remembered the ways of the house when he had boarded there, and was not surprised to find himself dining upon mutton half-burnt and half-raw, potatoes more like bullets than vegetables, and a partially cooked rice-pudding, served upon the remains of at least three dinner-services, accompanied by sour beer and very indifferent claret. Percival did not even pretend to eat; he sat back in his chair and declared, with an air of polite disgust, that he was not hungry. Rupert made up for his deficiencies, however; he swallowed what was set before him and conversed with his hostess, who was quite unconscious that anything was amiss. Mrs. Heron had a vague taste for metaphysics and political economy; she had beautiful theories of education, which she was always intending, at some future time, to put into practice for the benefit of her three little boys, Harry, Willy, and Jack. She spoke of these theories, with her blue eyes fixed on vacancy and her fork poised gracefully in the air, while Vivian laboured distastefully through his dinner, and Percival frowned in silence at the table-cloth.

"I have always thought," Mrs. Heron was saying sweetly, "that children ought not to be too much controlled. Their development should be perfectly free. My children grow up like young plants, with plenty of sun and air; they play as they like; they work when they feel that they can work best; and, if at times they are a little noisy, at any rate their noise never develops into riot."

Percival did not, perhaps, intend her to hear him, but, below his breath, he burst into a sardonic, little laugh and an aside to his sister Kitty.

"Never into riot! I never heard them stop short of it!"

Mrs. Heron looked at him uncertainly, and took pains to explain herself.

"Up to a certain point, I was going to say, Percival, dear. At the proper age, I think, that discipline, entire and perfect discipline, ought to begin."

"And what is the proper age?" said Percival, ironically. "For it seems to me that the boys are now quite old enough to endure a little discipline."

"Oh, at present," said Mrs. Heron, with undisturbed composure, "they are in Elizabeth's hands. I leave them entirely to her. I trust Elizabeth perfectly."

"Is that the reason why Elizabeth does not dine with us?" said Percival, looking at his step-mother with an expression of deep

hostility. But Mrs. Heron's placidity was of a kind which would not be ruffled.

"Elizabeth is so kind," she said. "She teaches them, and does everything for them; but, of course, they must go to school by-and-bye. Dear papa will not let me teach them myself. He tells me to forget that ever I was a governess; but, indeed"—with a faint, pensive smile—"my instincts are too strong for me sometimes, and I long to have my pupils back again. Do I not, Kitty, darling?"

"I was not a pupil of yours very long, Isabel," said Kitty, who never brought herself to the point of calling Mrs. Heron by anything but her Christian name.

"Not long," sighed Mrs. Heron. "Too short a time for me."

At this point Mr. Heron, who noticed very little of what was going on around him, turned to his son with a question about the politics of the day. Percival, with his nose in the air, hardly deigned at first to answer; but upon Vivian's quietly propounding some strongly Conservative views, which always acted on the younger Heron as a red rag is supposed to act upon a bull, he waxed impatient and then argumentative, until at last he talked himself into a good humour, and made everybody else good humoured.

When they returned to the untidy but pleasant-looking drawing-room, they found Elizabeth engaged in picking up the children's toys, straightening the sheets of music on the piano, and otherwise making herself generally useful. She had changed her dress, and put on a long, plain gown of white cashmere, which suited her admirably, although it was at least three years old, undeniably tight for her across the shoulders, and short at the wrists, having shrunk by repeated washings since the days when it first was made. She wore no trimmings and no ornaments, whereas Kitty, in her red frock, sported half-a-dozen trumpery bracelets, a silver necklace, and a little bunch of autumn flowers; and Mrs. Heron's pale-blue draperies were adorned with dozens of yards of cheap cream-coloured lace. Vivian looked at Elizabeth and wondered, almost for the first time, why she differed so greatly from the Herons. He had often seen her before; but, being now particularly interested by what he had heard about her, he observed her more than usual.

Mrs. Heron sat down at the piano; she played well, and was rather fond of exhibiting her musical proficiency. Percival and Kitty were engaged in an animated, low-toned conversation. Rupert approached Elizabeth, who was arranging some sketches in a portfolio with the diligence of a housemaid. She was stand-

ing just within the studio, which was separated from the drawing-room by a velvet curtain now partially drawn aside.

"Do you sketch? are these your drawings?" he asked her.

"No, they are Uncle Alfred's. I cannot draw."

"You are musical, I suppose," said Rupert, carelessly.

He took it for granted that, if a girl did not draw, she must needs play the piano. But her next words undeceived him.

"No, I can't play. I have no accomplishments."

"What do you mean by accomplishments?" asked Vivian, smiling.

"I mean that I know nothing about French and German, or music and drawing," said Elizabeth, calmly. "I never had any systematic education. I should make rather a good housemaid, I believe, but my friends won't allow me to take a housemaid's situation."

"I should think not," ejaculated Vivian.

"But it is all that I am fit for," she continued, quietly. "And I think it is rather a pity that I am not allowed to be happy in my own way."

There was a little silence. Vivian felt himself scarcely equal to the occasion. Presently she said, with more quickness of speech than usual:—

"You have been in Scotland lately, have you not?"

"I was there a short time ago, but for two days only."

"Ah, yes, you went to Netherglen?"

"I did. The Luttrells are connections of yours, are they not, Miss Murray?"

"Very distant ones," said Elizabeth.

"You know that Brian Luttrell has gone abroad?"

"I have heard so."

There was very little to be got out of Miss Murray. Vivian was almost glad when Percival joined them, and he was able to slip back to Kitty, with whom he had no difficulty in carrying on a conversation.

The studio was dimly lighted, and Percival, either by accident or design, allowed the curtain to fall entirely over the aperture between the two rooms. He looked round him. Mr. Heron was absent, and they had the room to themselves. Several unfinished canvasses were leaning against the walls; the portrait of an exceedingly cadaverous-looking old man was conspicuous upon the artist's easel; the lay figure was draped like a monk, and had a cowl drawn over its stiff, wooden head. Percival shrugged his shoulders.

"My father's studio isn't an attractive-looking place," he said, with a growl of disgust in his voice.

"Why did you come into it?" said Elizabeth.

"I had a good reason," he answered, looking at her.

If she understood the meaning that he wished to convey, it certainly did not embarrass or distress her in the least. She gave him a very friendly, but serious, kind of smile, and went on calmly with her work of sorting the papers and sketches that lay scattered around her.

"Elizabeth," he said, "I am offended with you."

"That happens so often," she replied, "that I am never greatly surprised nor greatly concerned at hearing it."

"It is of little consequence to you, no doubt," said Percival, rather huffily; "but I am—for once—perfectly serious, Elizabeth. Why could you not come down to dinner to-night when Rupert and I were here?"

"I very seldom come down to dinner. I was with the children."

"The children are not your business."

"Indeed they are. Mrs. Heron has given them into my charge, and I am glad of it. Not that I care for all children," said Elizabeth, with the cool impartiality that was wont to drive Percival to the very verge of distraction. "I dislike some children very much, indeed, but, you see, I happen—fortunately for myself—to be fond of Harry, Willie, and Jack."

"Fortunately, for yourself, do you say? Fortunately for them! You must be fond of them, indeed. You can have their society all day and every day; and yet you could not spare a single hour to come and dine with us like a rational being. Vivian will think they make a nurserymaid of you, and I verily believe they do!"

"What does it signify to us what Mr. Vivian thinks? I don't mind being taken for a nurserymaid at all, if I am only doing my proper work. But I would have come down, Percival, indeed, I would, if little Jack had not seemed so fretful and unwell. I am afraid something really is the matter with his back; he complains so much of pain in it, and cannot sleep at night. I could not leave him while he was crying and in pain, could I?"

"What did you do with him?" asked Percival, after a moment's pause.

"I walked up and down the room. He went to sleep in my arms."

"Of course, you tired yourself out with that great, heavy boy!"

"You don't know how light little Jack is; you cannot have taken him in your arms for a long time, Percival," said she, in a hurt tone; "and I am very strong. My hands ought to be of some use to me, if my brain is not."

"Your brain is strong enough, and your will is strong enough for anything, but your hands——"

"Are they to be useless?"

"Yes, they are to be useless," he said, "and somebody else must work for you."

"That arrangement would not suit me. I like to work for myself," she answered, smiling.

They were standing on opposite sides of a small table on which the portfolio of drawings rested. Percival was holding up one side of the portfolio, and she was placing the sketches one by one upon each other.

"Do you know what you look like?" said Percival, suddenly. There was a thrill of pleasurable excitement in his tone, a glow of ardour in his dark eyes. "You look like a tall, white lily to-night, with your white dress and your gleaming hair. The pure white of the petals and the golden heart of the lily have found their match."

"I am recompensed for the trouble I took in changing my dress this evening," said Elizabeth, glancing down at it complacently. "I did not expect that it would bring me so poetic a compliment. Thank you, Percival."

"'Consider the lilies; they toil not, neither do they spin,'" quoted Percival, recklessly. "Why should you toil and spin?—a more beautiful lily than any one of them. If Solomon in all his glory was not equal to those Judean lilies, then I may safely say that the Queen of Sheba would be beaten outright by our Queen Elizabeth, with her white dress and her golden locks!"

"Mrs. Heron would say you were profane," said Elizabeth, tranquilly. "These comparisons of yours don't please me exactly, Percival; they always remind me of the flowery leaders in some of the evening papers, and make me remember that you are a journalist. They have a professional air."

"A professional air!" repeated Percival, in disgust. He let the lid of the portfolio fall with a bang upon the table. Several of the sketches flew wildly over the floor, and Elizabeth turned to him with a reproachful look, but she had no time to protest, for in that moment he had seized her hands and drawn her aside with him to a sofa that stood on one side of the room.

"You shall not answer me in that way," he said, half-irritated, half-amused, and wholly determined to have his way. "You shall sit down there and listen to me in a serious spirit, if you can. No, don't shake your head and look at me so mockingly. It is time that we understood each other, and I don't mean another night to pass over our heads without some decision being arrived at. Elizabeth, you must know that you have my

happiness in your hands. I can't live without you. I can't bear to see you making yourself a slave to everybody, with no one to love you, no one to work for you and save you from anxiety and care. Let me work for you, now, dearest; be my wife, and I will see that you have your proper place, and that you are tended and cared for as a woman ought to be."

Elizabeth had withdrawn her hands from his; she even turned a little pale. He fancied that the tears stood in her eyes.

"Oh," she said, "I wish you had not said this to me, Percival."

It was easy for him to slip down from his low seat to a footstool, and there, on one knee, to look full into her face, and let his handsome, dark eyes plead for him.

"Why should I not have said it?" he breathed, softly. "Has it not been the dream of my life for months?—I might almost say for years? I loved you ever since you first came amongst us, Elizabeth, years ago."

"Did you, indeed?" said Elizabeth. A light of humour showed itself through the tears that had come into her eyes. An amused, reluctant smile curved the corners of her mouth. "What, when I was an awkward, clumsy, ignorant schoolgirl, as I remember your calling me one day after I had done something exceptionally stupid? And when you played practical jokes upon me—hung my doll up by its hair, and made me believe that there was a ghost in the attics—did you care for me then? Oh, no, Percival, you forget! and probably you exaggerate the amount of your feeling as much as you do the length of time it has lasted."

"It's no laughing matter, I assure you, Elizabeth," said Percival, laughing a little himself at these recollections, but looking vexed at the same time. "I am perfectly serious now, and very much in earnest; and I can't believe that my stupid jokes, when I was a mere boy, have had such an effect upon your mind as to prevent you from caring for me now."

"No," said Elizabeth. "They make no difference; but—I'm very sorry, Percival—I really don't think that it would do."

"What would not do? what do you mean?" said Percival, frowning.

"This arrangement; this—this—proposition of yours. Nobody would like it."

"Nobody could object. I have a perfect right to marry if I choose, and whom I choose. I am independent of my father."

"You could not marry yet, Percival," she said, in rather a chiding tone.

"I could—if you would not mind sharing my poverty with me. If you loved me, Elizabeth, you would not mind."

"I am afraid I do not love you—in that way," said Elizabeth,

meditatively. 'No, it would never do. I never dreamt of such a thing."

"Nobody expects you to have dreamt of it," rejoined Percival, with a short laugh. "The dreaming can be left to me. The question is rather whether you will think of it now—consider it a little, I mean. It seems to be a new idea to you—though I must say I wonder that you have not seen how much I loved you, Elizabeth! I am willing to wait until you have grown used to it. I cannot believe that you do not care for me! You would not be so cruel; you must love me a little—just a very little, Elizabeth."

"Well, I do," said Elizabeth, smiling at his vehemence. "I do love you—more than a little—as I love you all. You have been so good to me that I could not help caring for you—in spite of the doll and the ghost in the attic." Her smile grew gravely mischievous as she finished the sentence.

"Oh, that is not what I want," cried Percival, starting up from his lowly position at her feet. "That is not the kind of love that I am asking for at all."

"I am afraid you will get no other," said Elizabeth, with a ring of sincerity in her voice that left no room for coquetry. "I am sorry, but I cannot help it, Percival."

"Your love is not given to anyone else?" he demanded, fiercely.

"You have no right to ask. But if it is a satisfaction to you, I can assure you that I have never cared for anyone in that way. I do not know what it means," said Elizabeth, looking directly before her. "I have never been able to understand."

"Let me make you understand," murmured Percival, his momentary anger melting before the complete candour of her eyes. "Let me teach you to love, Elizabeth."

She was silent—irresolute, as it appeared to him.

"You would learn very easily," said he. "Try—let me try."

"I don't think I could be taught," she answered, slowly. "And really I am not sure that I care to learn."

"That is simply because you do not know your own heart," said Percival, dogmatically. "Trust me, and wait awhile. I will have no answer now, Elizabeth. I will ask you again."

"And suppose my answer is the same?"

"It won't be the same," said Percival, in a masterful sort of way. "You will understand by-and-bye."

She did not see the fire in his eyes, nor the look of passionate yearning that crossed his face as he stood beside her, or she would scarcely have been surprised when he bent down suddenly and pressed his lips to her forehead. She started to her feet, colouring vividly and angrily. "How dare you, Percival!——" she

began. But she could not finish the sentence. Kitty called her from the other room. Kitty's face appeared; and the curtain was drawn aside by an unseen hand with a great clatter of rings upon the pole.

"Where have you been all this time?" said she. "Isabel wants you, Lizzie. Percival, Mr. Vivian talks of going."

Elizabeth vanished through the curtain. Percival had not even time to breathe into her ear the "Forgive me" with which he meant to propitiate her. He was not very penitent for his offence. He thought that he was sure of Elizabeth's pardon, because he thought himself sure of Elizabeth's love. But, as a matter of fact, that stolen kiss did not at all advance his cause with Elizabeth Murray.

He did not see her again that night—a fact which sent him back to his lodging in an ill-satisfied frame of mind. He and Vivian shared a sitting-room between them; and, on their return from Mr. Heron's, they disposed themselves for their usual smoke and chat. But neither of them seemed inclined for conversation. Rupert lay back in a long lounging-chair; Percival turned over the leaves of a new publication which had been sent to him for review, and uttered disparaging comments upon it from time to time.

"I hope all critics are not so hypercritical as you are," said Vivian at last, when the volume had finally been tossed to the other end of the room with an exclamation of disgust.

"Pah! why will people write such abominable stuff?" said Percival. "Reach me down that volume of Bacon's Essays behind you; I must have something to take the taste out of my mouth before I begin to write."

Vivian handed him the book, and watched him with some interest as he read. The frown died away from his forehead, and the mouth gradually assumed a gentler expression before he had turned the first page. In five minutes he was so much absorbed that he did not hear the question which Vivian addressed to him.

"What position," said Rupert, deliberately, "does Miss Murray hold in your father's house?"

"Eh? What? What position?" Away went Percival's book to the floor; he raised himself in his chair, and began to light his pipe, which had gone out. "What do you mean?" he said.

"Is she a ward of your father's? Is she a relation of yours?"

"Yes, of course, she is," said Percival, rather resentfully. "She is a cousin. Let me see. Her father, Gordon Murray, was my mother's brother. She is my first cousin. And Cinderella in general to the household," he added, grimly.

"Oh, Gordon Murray was her father? So I supposed. Then if poor Richard Luttrell had not died I suppose she would have been a sort of connection of my sister's. I remember Angela wondered whether Gordon Murray had left any family."

"Why?"

"Why? You know the degree of relationship and the terms of the will made by Mrs. Luttrell's father, don't you?

"Not I."

"Gordon Murray—this Miss Murray's father—was next heir after the two Luttrells, if they died childless. Of course, Brian is still living; but if he died, Miss Murray would inherit, I understand."

"There's not much chance," said Percival, lightly.

"Not much," responded Vivian.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. The landlady, with many apologies, brought them a telegram which had been left at the house during their absence, and which she had forgotten to deliver. It was addressed to Vivian, who tore it open, read it twice, and then passed it on to Percival without a word.

It was from Angela Vivian, and contained these words only—

"Brian Luttrell is dead."

CHAPTER X.

BROTHER DINO.

WHEN Brian Luttrell left England he had no very clear idea of the places that he meant to visit, or the things that he wished to do. He wished only to leave old associations behind him—to forget, and, if possible to be forgotten.

He was conscious of a curious lack of interest in life; it seemed to him as though the very springs of his being were dried up at their source. As a matter of fact, he was thoroughly out of health, as well as out of spirits; he had been over-working himself in London, and was scarcely out of the doctor's hands before he went to Scotland; then the shock of his brother's death and the harshness of his mother toward him had contributed their share to the utter disorganisation of his faculties. In short, Brian was not himself at all; it might even be said that he was out of his right mind. He had attacks of headache, generally terminating in a kind of stupor rather than sleep, during which he could scarcely be held responsible for the things he said or did. At other times, a feverish restlessness came upon him; he could not sleep, and he could not eat; he would then go out and walk for miles and miles, until he was thoroughly ex-

hausted. It was a wonder that his mind did not give way altogether. His sanity hung upon a thread.

It was in this state that he found himself one day upon a Rhine boat, bound for Mainz. He had a very vague notion of how he had managed to get there; he had no notion at all of his reason for travelling in that direction. It dawned upon him by degrees that he had chosen the very same route, and made the same stoppages, as he had done when he was a mere boy, travelling with his father upon the Continent. Richard and his mother had not been there; Brian and Mr. Luttrell had spent a particularly happy time together, and the remem brance of it soothed his troubled brain, and caused his eye to rest with a sort of dreamy pleasure upon the scene around him.

It was rather late for a Rhine expedition, and the boat was not at all full. Brian rather thought that the journey with his father had been taken at about the same time of the year—perhaps even a little later. He had a special memory of the wealth of Virginian creeper which covered the buildings near Coblentz. He looked out for it when the boat stopped at the landing-stage, and thought of the time when he had wandered hand-in-hand with his father in the pleasant Anlagen on the river banks, and gathered a scarlet trail of leaves from the castle walls. The leaves were in their full autumnal glory now; he must have been there at about the same season when he was a boy.

After determining this fact to his satisfaction, Brian went back to the seat that he had found for himself at the end of the boat, and began once more to watch the gliding panorama of "castled crag" and vine-clad slope, which was hardly as familiar to him as it is to most of us. But, after all, Drachenfels and Ehrenbreitstein had no great interest for him. He had no great interest in anything. Perhaps the little excitement and bustle at the landing-places pleased him more than the scenery itself—the peasants shouting to each other from the banks, the baskets of grapes handed in one after another, the patient oxen waiting in the roads between the shafts; these were sights which made no great claim upon his attention and were curiously soothing to his jaded nerves. He watched them languidly, but was not sorry from time to time to close his eyes and shut out his surroundings altogether.

The worst of it was, that when he had closed his eyes for a little time, the scene in the wood always came back to him with terrible distinctness, or else there rose up before his eyes a picture of that darkened room, with Richard's white face upon the pillow and his mother's dark form and outstretched hand. These were the memories that would not let him sleep at night

or take his ease in the world by day. He could not forget the past.

There was another passenger on the boat who passed and repassed Brian several times, and looked at him with curious attention. Brian's face was one which was always apt to excite interest. It had grown thin and pallid during the past fortnight; the eyes were set in deep hollows, and wore a painfully sad expression. He looked as if he had passed through some period of illness or sorrow of which the traces could never be wholly obliterated. There was a pathetic hopelessness in his face which was somewhat remarkable in so young a man.

The passenger who regarded him with so much interest was also a young man, not more than Brian's own age, but apparently not an Englishman. He spoke English a little, though with a foreign accent, but his French was remarkably good and pure. He stopped short at last in front of Brian and eyed him attentively, evidently believing that the young man was asleep. But Brian was not asleep; he knew that the regular footstep of his travelling companion had ceased, and was hardly surprised, when he opened his eyes, to find the Frenchman—if such he were—standing before him.

Brian looked at him attentively for a moment, and recognised the fact that the young foreigner wore an ecclesiastical habit, a black *soutane* or cassock, such as is worn in Roman Catholic seminaries, not necessarily denoting that the person who wears it has taken priest's vows upon him. Brian was not sufficiently well versed in the subject to know what grade was signified by the dress of the young ecclesiastic, but he conjectured (chiefly from its plainness and extreme shabbiness) that it was not a very high one. The young man's face pleased him. It was intellectual and refined in contour, rather of the ascetic type; with that faint redness about the heavy eyelids which suggests an insufficiency of sleep or a too great amount of study; large, penetrating, dark eyes, underneath a broad, white brow; a firm mouth and chin. There was something about his face which seemed vaguely familiar to Brian; and yet he could not in the least remember where he had seen it before, or what associations it called up in his mind.

The young man courteously raised his broad, felt hat.

"Pardon me," he said, "you are ill—suffering—can I do nothing for you?"

"I am not ill, thank you. You are very good, but I want nothing," said Brian, with a feeling of annoyance which showed itself in the coldness of his manner. And yet he was attracted rather than repelled by the stranger's voice and manner. The

voice was musical, the manner decidedly prepossessing. He was not sorry that the young ecclesiastic did not seem ready to accept the rebuff, but took a seat on the bench by his side, and made a remark upon the scenery through which they were passing. Brian responded slightly enough, but with less coldness; and in a few minutes—he did not know how it happened—he was talking to the stranger more freely than he had done to anyone since he left England. Their conversation was certainly confined to trivial topics; but there was a frankness and a delicacy of perception about the young foreigner which made him a very attractive companion. He gave Brian in a few words an outline of the chief events of his life, and seemed to expect no confidence from Brian in return. He had been brought up in a Roman Catholic seminary, and was destined to become a Benedictine monk. He was on his way to join an elder priest in Mainz; thence he expected to proceed to Italy, but was not sure of his destination.

"I shall perhaps meet you again, then?" said Brian. "I am perhaps going to Italy myself."

The young man smiled and shook his head. "You are scarcely likely to encounter me, monsieur," he answered. "I shall be busy amongst the poor and sick, or at work within the monastery. I shall remember you—but I do not think that we shall meet again."

"By what name should I ask for you if I came across any of your order?" said Brian.

"I am generally known as Dino Vasari, or Brother Dino, at your service, monsieur," replied the Italian, cheerfully. "If, in your goodness, you wished to inquire after me, you should ask at the monastery of San Stefano, where I spend a few weeks every year in retreat. The Prior, Father Cristoforo, is an old friend of mine, and he will always welcome you if you should pass that way. There is good sleeping accommodation for visitors."

Brian took the trouble to make an entry in his note-book to this effect. It turned out to be a singularly useful one. As they were reaching Mainz something prompted Brian to ask a question. "Why did you speak to me this afternoon?" he said, the morbid suspiciousness of a man who is sick in mind as well as body returning full upon him. "You do not know me?"

"No, monsieur, I do not know you." The ecclesiastic's pale brow flushed; he even looked embarrassed. "Monsieur," he said at last, "you had the appearance—you will pardon my saying so—of one who was either ill or bore about with him

some unspoken trouble; it is the privilege of the Order to which I hope one day to belong to offer help when help is needed; and for a moment I hoped it might be my special privilege to give some help to you."

"Why did you think so?" Brian asked, hastily. "You did not know my name?"

The Italian cast down his eyes. "Yes, monsieur," he said in a low tone, "I did know your name."

Brian started up. He did not stop to weigh probabilities; he forgot how little likely a young foreign seminarist would be to hear news of an accident in Scotland; he felt foolishly certain that his name—as that of the man who had killed his brother—must be known to all the world! It was the wildest possible delusion, such as could occur only to a man whose mind was off its balance—and even he could not retain it for more than a minute or two; but in that space of time he uttered a few wild words, which caused the young monk to raise his dark eyes to his face with a look of sorrowful compassion.

"Does everyone know my wretched story, then? Do I carry a mark about with me—like Cain?" Brian cried aloud.

"I know nothing of your story, monsieur," said Brother Dino, as he called himself, after a little pause, "When I said that I knew your name, I should more properly have said the name of your family. A gentleman of your name once visited the little town where I was brought up." He paused again and added gently, "I have peculiar reasons for remembering him. He was very good to a member of my family."

Brian had recovered his self-possession before the end of the young priest's speech, and was heartily ashamed of his own weakness.

"I beg your pardon," he said, sinking back into his seat with an air of weariness and discouragement that would have touched the heart of a tender-natured man, such as was Brother Dino of San Stefano. "I must be an utter fool to have spoken as I did. You knew my father, did you? That must be long ago."

"Many years." Brother Dino looked at the Englishman with some expression in his eyes which Brian did not remark at the moment, but which recurred afterwards to his memory as being singular. There was sympathy in it, pity, perhaps, and, above all, an intense curiosity. "Many years ago my friends knew him; not I. The Signor Luttrell—he lives still in your country?"

"No. He died eight years ago."

"And——"

A question evidently trembled on the Italian's lips, but he restrained himself. He could not ask it when he saw the pain

and the dread in Brian's face. But Brian answered the question that he had meant to ask.

"My brother is dead, also. My mother is living and well."

Then he wheeled round and looked at the landing-stage, to which they were now very close. The stranger respected his emotion; he glanced once at the band of crape on Brian's arm, and then walked quietly away. When he returned it was only to say good-bye.

"I should like to see you again," Brian said to him. Perhaps I may find you out and visit you some day. You find your life peaceful and happy, no doubt?"

"Perfectly."

"I envy you," said Brian.

They parted. Brian went away to his hotel, leaving the young seminarist still standing on the deck—a black figure with his pale hands crossed upon his breast in the glow of the evening sunshine, awaiting the arrival of his superior as a soldier waits for his commanding officer. Brian looked back at him once and waved his hand; he had not been so much interested in anyone for what seemed to him almost an eternity of time.

Sitting sadly and alone in the hotel that night, he fell to pondering over some of the words that the young Italian had spoken, and the questions that he had asked. He wondered greatly what was the service that his father had rendered to these Italians, and blamed himself a little for not asking more about the young man's history. He knew well enough that his parents had once spent two or three years abroad—chiefly in Italy; he himself had been born in an Italian town, and had spent almost the whole of the first year of his life in a little village at the foot of the Apennines. Was it not near a place called San Stefano, indeed, that he had been nursed by an Italian peasant woman? Brian determined, in a vague and dreamy way, that at some future time he would visit San Stefano, find out the history of his new acquaintance, and see the place where he had been born at the same time. That is if ever he felt inclined to do anything of the sort again. At present—and especially as the temporary interest inspired by the young Italian died away—he felt as if he cared too little for his future to resolve upon doing anything. There was a letter waiting for him, addressed in Mr. Colquhoun's handwriting. He had not even the heart to open it and see what the lawyer had to say. Something drew him next morning towards that wonderful old building of red stone, which looks as if it were hourly crumbling away, and yet has lasted so many hundred years, the cathedral of Mainz. The service was just over; the organ still murmured

soft, harmonious cadences. The incense was wafted to his nostrils as he walked down the echoing nave. There had been a mass for the dead and a funeral that morning; part of the cathedral was draped in black cloth and ornamented by hundreds of wax candles, which flared in the sunlight and dropped wax on the uneven pavement below. There was an oppressiveness in the atmosphere to Brian; everything spoke to him of death and decay in that strange, old city, which might veritably be called a city of the dead. He turned aside into the cloisters, and listened mechanically while an old man discoursed to him in crabbed German concerning Fastrada's tomb and the carved face of the minstrel Frauenlob upon the cloister wall. Presently, however, the guide showed him a little door, and led him out into the pleasant grassy space round which the cloisters had been built. He was conscious of a great feeling of relief. The blue sky was above him again, and his feet were on the soft, green grass. There were tombstones amongst the grass, but they were overgrown with ivy and blossoming rose-trees. Brian sat down with a great sigh upon one of the old blocks of marble that strewed the ground, and told the guide to leave him there awhile. The man thought that he wanted to sketch the place, as many English artists did, and retired peacefully enough. Brian had no intention of sketching; he wanted only to feel himself alone, to watch the gay, little sparrows as they leaped from spray to spray of the monthly rose-trees, the waving of the long grass between the tombstones, and the glimpse of blue sky beyond the mouldering reddish walls on either hand.

As he sat there, almost as though he were waiting for some expected visitor, the cloister doors opened once more, and two or three men in black gowns came out. They were all priests except one, and this one was the young Italian whose acquaintance Brian had made upon the steamer. They were talking rapidly together; one of them seemed to be questioning the young man, and he was replying with the serene yet earnest expression of countenance which had impressed Brian so favourably. At first they stood still; by-and-bye they crossed the quadrangle, and here Brother Dino fell somewhat behind the others. Following a sudden impulse, Brian suddenly rose as he came near, and addressed him.

"Can you speak to me? I want to ask you about my father——"

He spoke in English, but the young priest replied in Italian.

"I cannot speak to you now. Wait till we meet at San Stefano."

The words might be abrupt, but the smile which followed them was so sweet, so benign, that Brian was only struck with a sud-

den sense of the beauty of the expression upon that keen Italian face. "God be with you!" said Brother Dino, as he passed on. He stretched out his hand; it held one of the faintly-pink, sweet roses, which he had plucked near the cloister door. He almost thrust it into Brian's passive fingers. "God be with you," he said, in his native tongue once more. "Farewell, brother." In another moment he was gone. Brian had the green enclosure, the birds and the roses to himself once more.

He looked down at the little overblown flower in his hand and carried it mechanically to his nostrils. It was very sweet.

"Why does he think that I shall go to San Stefano?" he asked himself. "What is San Stefano to me? Why should I meet him there?"

He sat down again, holding the flower loosely in one hand, and resting his head upon the other. The old langour and sickness of heart were coming back upon him; the momentary excitement had passed away. He would have given a great deal to be able to rouse himself from the depression which had taken such firm hold of his mind; but he failed to discover any means of doing so. He had a vague, morbid fancy that Brother Dino could help him to master his own trouble—he knew not how; but this hope had failed him. He did not even care to go to San Stefano.

After a little time he remembered the letter in his pocket, addressed to him in Mr. Colquhoun's handwriting. He took it out and looked at it for a few minutes. Why should Mr. Colquhoun write to him unless he had something unpleasant to say? Perhaps he was only forwarding some letters. This quiet, grassy quadrangle was a good place in which to read letters, he thought. He would open the envelope and see what Colquhoun had to say.

He opened it very slowly.

Then he started, and his hand began to tremble The only letter enclosed was one in his mother's handwriting. Upon a slip of blue paper were a few words from the lawyer. "Forwarded to Mr. Brian Luttrell at Mrs. Luttrell's request on the 25th of October, 1877, by James Colquhoun."

Brian opened the letter. It had no formal opening, but it was carefully signed and dated, and ran as follows:—

"They tell me that I have done you an injury by doubting your word, and that I am an unnatural mother in saying—even in my own chamber—what I thought. I have an excuse, which no one knows but myself and James Colquhoun. I think it is well under present circumstances to tell you what it is.

"I am a strong believer in race. I think that the influence of blood is far more powerful than those of training or education,

how strong soever they may be. Therefore, I was never astonished although I was grieved, to see that your love for Richard was not so great as that of brothers should have been——"

"It is false!" said Brian, with a groan, crushing the letter in his hand, and letting it fall to his side. "No brother could have loved Richard more than I."

Presently he took up the letter again and read.

"Because I knew," it went on, "though many a woman in my position would not have guessed the truth, that you were not Richard's brother at all: that you were not my son."

Again Brian paused, this time in utter bewilderment.

"Is my mother mad?" he said to himself. "I—not her son? Who am I, then?"

"I repeat what I have said,"—so ran Mrs. Luttrell's letter—"with all the emphasis which I can lay upon the words. The matter may not be capable of proof, but the truth remains. You are not my son, not Edward Luttrell's son, not Richard Luttrell's brother—no relation of ours at all; not even of English or Scottish blood. Your parents were Italian peasant-folk; and my son, Brian Luttrell, lies buried in the churchyard of an Italian village at the foot of the Western Apennines. You are a native of San Stefano, and your mother was my nurse."

CHAPTER XI.

ON A MOUNTAIN-SIDE.

"WHEN my child Brian was born we were renting a villa near San Stefano, and were somewhat far removed from any English doctor. My doctor was, therefore, an Italian; and what was worse, he was an Italian monk. I hate foreigners, and I hate monks; so you may imagine for yourself the way in which I looked upon him. No doubt he had a hand in the plot that has ended so miserably for me and mine, so fortunately for you.

"My Brian was nursed by our gardener's wife, a young Italian woman called Vincenza, whose child was about the age of mine. I saw Vincenza's child several times. Its eyes were brown (like yours); my baby's eyes were blue. It was when they were both about two months old that I was seized with a malarious fever, then very prevalent. They kept the children away from me for months. At last I insisted upon seeing them. The baby had been ill, they told me; I must be prepared for a great change in him. Even then my heart misgave me, I knew not why.

"Vincenza brought a child and laid it in my lap. I looked at it, and then I looked at her. She was deadly white, and her eyes

were red with tears. I did not know why. Of course I see now that she had enough of the mother's heart in her to be loath to give up her child. For it was her child that she had placed upon my knee. I knew it from the very first.

"'Take this child away and give me my own,' I said. 'This is not mine.'

"The woman threw up her hands and ran out of the room. I thought she had gone to fetch my baby, and I remained with her child—a puny, crying thing—upon my knees. But she did not return. Presently my husband came in, and I appealed to him. 'Tell Vincenza to take her wretched, little baby away,' I said. 'I want my own. This is her child; not mine.'

"My husband looked at me, pityingly, as it seemed to my eyes. Suddenly the truth burst upon me. I sprang to my feet and threw the baby away from me upon the bed. 'My child is dead,' I cried. 'Tell me the truth; my child is dead.' And then I knew no more for days and weeks.

"When I recovered, I found, to my utter horror, that Vincenza and her child had not left the house. My words had been taken for the ravings of a mad woman. Every one believed the story of this wicked Italian woman, who declared that it was her child who had died, mine that had lived! I knew better. Could I be mistaken in the features of my own child? Had my Brian those great, dark, brown eyes? I saw how it was. The Italians had plotted to put their child in my Brian's place; they had forgotten that a mother's instinct would know her own amongst a thousand. I accused them openly of their wickedness; and, in spite of their tears and protestations, I saw from their guilty looks that it was true. My own Brian was dead, and I was left with Vincenza's child, and expected to love it as my own.

"For nobody believed me. My husband never believed me. He maintained to the very last that you were his child and mine. I fought like a wild beast for my dead child's rights; but even I was mastered in the end. They threatened me—yes, James Colquhoun, in my husband's name, threatened me—with a madhouse, if I did not put away from me the suspicion that I had conceived. They assured me that Brian was not dead; that it was Vincenza's child that had died; that I was incapable of distinguishing one baby from another—and so on. They said that I should be separated from my own boy—my Richard, whom I tenderly loved — unless I put away from me this 'insane fancy,' and treated that Italian baby as my son. Oh, they were cruel to me—very cruel. But they got their way. I yielded because I could not bear to leave my husband and my boy. I let

them place the child in my arms, and I learnt to call it Brian. I buried the secret in my own heart, but I was never once moved from my opinion. My own child was buried at San Stefano, and the boy that I took back with me to England was the gardener's son. You were that boy.

"I was silent about your parentage, but I never loved you, and my husband knew that I did not. For that reason, I suppose, he made you his favourite. He petted you, caressed you more than was reasonable or right. Only once did any conversation on the subject pass between us. He had refused to punish you when you were a boy of ten, and had quarrelled with Richard. 'Mark my words,' I said to him, 'there will be more quarrelling, and with worse results, if you do not put a stop to it now. I should never trust a lad of Italian blood.' He looked at me, turning pale as he looked. 'Have you not forgotten that unhappy delusion, then?' he said. 'It is no delusion,' I answered him, composedly, 'to remind myself sometimes that this boy—Brian, as you call him—is the son of Giovanni Vasari and his wife.' 'Margaret,' he said, 'you are a mad woman!' He went out, shutting the door hastily behind him. But he never misunderstood me again. Do you know what were his last words to me upon his death-bed? 'Don't tell him,' he said, pointing to you with his weak, dying hand, 'If you ever loved me, Margaret, don't tell him.' And then he died, before I had promised not to tell. If I had promised then, I would have kept my word.

"I knew what he meant. I resolved that I would never tell you. And but for Richard's death I would have held my tongue. But to see you in Richard's place, with Richard's money and Richard's lands, is more than I can bear. I will not tell this story to the world, but I refuse to keep you in ignorance any longer. If you like to possess Richard's wealth dishonestly, you are at liberty to do so. Any court of law would give it to you, and say that it was legally yours. There is, I imagine, no proof possible of the truth of my suspicions. Your mother and father are, I believe, both dead. I do not remember the name of the monk who acted as my doctor. There may be relations of your parents at San Stefano, but they are not likely to know the story of Vincenza's child. At any rate, you are not ignorant any longer of the reasons for which I believe it possible that you knew what you were doing when you were guilty of Richard Luttrell's death. There is not a drop of honest Scotch or English blood in your veins. You are an Italian, and I have always seen in your character the faults of the race to which by birth and parentage you belong. If I had not been weak enough to yield to

the threats and the entreaties with which my husband and his tools assailed me, you would now be living, as your forefathers lived, a rude and hardy peasant on the North Italian plains; and I—I might have been a happy woman still."

The letter bore the signature "Margaret Luttrell," and that was all.

The custodian of the place wondered what had come to the English gentleman; he sat so still, with his face buried in his hands, and some open sheets of paper at his feet. The old man had a pretty, fair-haired daughter who could speak English a little. He called her and pointed out the stranger's bowed figure from one of the cloister windows.

"He looks as if he had had some bad news," said the girl. "Do you think that he is ill, father? Shall I take him a glass of water, and ask him to walk into the house?"

Brian was aroused from a maze of wretched, confused thought by the touch of Gretchen's light hand upon his arm. She had a glass of water in her hand.

"Would the gentleman not drink?" she asked him, with a look of pity that startled him from his absorption. "The sun was hot that day, and the gentleman had chosen the hottest place to sit in; would he not rather choose the cool cloister, or her father's house, for one little hour or two?"

Brian stammered out some words of thanks, and drank the water eagerly. He would not stay, however; he had bad news which compelled him to move on quickly—as quickly as possible. And then, with a certain whiteness about the lips, and a look of perplexed pain in his eyes, he picked up the papers as they lay strewn upon the grass, bowed to Gretchen with mechanical politeness, and made his way to the door by which he had come in. One thing he forgot; he never thought of it until long afterwards; the sweet, frail rose that Brother Dino had placed within his hand when he bade him God-speed. In less than an hour he was in the train; he hardly knew why or whither he was bound; he knew only that one of his restless fits had seized him and was driving him from the town in the way that it was wont to do.

Mrs. Luttrell's letter was a great shock to him. He never dreamt at first of questioning the truth of her assertions. He thought it very likely that she had been perfectly able to judge, and that her husband had been mistaken in treating the matter as a delusion. At any time, this conviction would have been a sore trouble to him, for he had loved her and her husband and Richard very tenderly, but just now it seemed to him almost more than he could bear. He had divested himself of nearly the

whole of what had been considered his inheritance, because he disliked so much the thought of profiting by Richard's death; was he also now to divest himself of the only name that he had known, of the country that he loved, of the nation that he had been proud to call his own? If his mother's story were true, he was, as she had said, the son of an Italian gardener called Vasari; his name then must be Vasari; his baptismal name he did not know. And Brian Luttrell did not exist; or rather, Brian Luttrell had been buried as a baby in the little churchyard of San Stefano. It was a bitter thought to him.

But it could not be true. His whole being rose up in revolt against the suggestion that the father whom he had loved so well had not been his own father; that Richard had been of no kin to him. Surely his mother's mind must have been disordered when she refused to acknowledge him. It could not possibly be true that he was not her son. At any rate, one duty was plain to him. He must go to San Stefano and ascertain, as far as he could, the true history of the Vasari family. And in the meantime he could write to Mr. Colquhoun. He was obliged to go on to Geneva, as he knew that letters and remittances were to await him there. As soon as he had received the answer that Mr. Colquhoun would send to his letter of inquiry, he would proceed to Italy at once.

Some delay in obtaining the expected remittances kept Brian for more than a week at Geneva. And there, in spite of the seclusion in which he chose to live, and his resolute avoidance of all society, it happened that before he had been in the place three days he met an old University acquaintance—a strong, cheery, good-natured fellow called Gunston, whose passion for climbing Swiss mountains seemed to be unappeasable. He tried hard to make Brian accompany him on his next expedition, but failed. Both strength and energy were wanting to him at this time.

Mr. Colquhoun's answers to Brian's communications were short, and, to the young man's mind, unsatisfactory. "At the time when Mrs. Luttrell first made the statement that she believed you to be Vincenza Vasari's son, her mind was in a very unsettled state. Medical evidence went to show that mothers did at times conceive a violent dislike to one or other of their children. This was probably a case in point. The Vasaris were honest, respectable people, and there was no reason to suppose that any fraud had been perpetrated. At the same time, it was impossible to convince Mrs. Luttrell that her own child had not died; and Mr. Colquhoun was of opinion that she would never acknowledge Brian as her son again, or consent to hold any personal intercourse with him."

"It would be better if I were dead and out of all this uncertainty," said Brian, bitterly, when he had read the letter. Yet, something in it gave him a sort of stimulus. He took several long excursions, late though the season was; and in a few days he again encountered Gunston, who was delighted to welcome him as a companion. Brian was a practised mountaineer; and though his health had lately been impaired, he seemed to regain it in the cold, clear air of the Swiss Alps. Gunston did not find him a genial companion; he was silent and even grim; but he was a daring climber, and exposed his life sometimes with a hardihood which approached temerity.

But a day arrived on which Brian's climbing feats came to an end. They had made an easy ascent, and were descending the mountain on the southern side, when an accident took place. It was one which often occurs, and which can be easily pictured to oneself. They were crossing some loose snow when the whole mass began to move, slowly first, then rapidly, down the slope of the mountain-side.

Brian sank almost immediately up to his waist in the snow. He noticed that the guide had turned his face to the descent and stretched out his arms, and he imitated this action as well as he was able, hoping in that manner to keep them free. But he was too deeply sunk in the snow to be able to turn round, and as he was in the rear of the others he could not see what became of his companions. He heard one shout from Gunston, and that was all—"Good God, Luttrell, we're lost!" And then the avalanche swept them onwards, first with a sharp, hissing sound, and then with a grinding roar as of thunder, and Brian gave himself up for lost, indeed.

He was not sorry. Death was the easiest possible solution of all his difficulties. He had looked for it many times; but he was glad to think that on this day, at least, he had not sought it of his own free will. He thought of his mother—he could not call her otherwise in this last hour—he thought of the father and the brother who had been dear to him in this world, and would not, he believed, be less dear to him in the next; he thought of Angela, who would be a little sorry for him, and Hugo, whom he could no longer help out of his numerous difficulties. All these memories of his old home and friends flashed over his mind in less than a second of time. He even thought of the estate, and of the Miss Murray who would inherit it. And then he tried to say a little prayer, but could not fix his mind sufficiently to put any petition into words.

And at this point he became aware that he was descending less rapidly.

His head and arms were fortunately still free. By a side glance he saw that the snow at some distance before him had stopped sliding altogether. Then it ceased to move at a still higher point, until at the spot where he lay it also became motionless, although above him it was still rushing down as if to bury him in a living grave. He threw his hands up above his head, and made a furious effort to extricate himself before the snow should freeze around him. And in this effort he was more successful than he had even hoped to be. But the pressure of the snow upon him was so great that he thought at first that it would break his ribs. When the motion had ceased, however, this pressure became less powerful; by the help of his ice-axe he managed to free himself, and knew that he was as yet unhurt, if not yet safe.

He looked round for his friend and for the guides. They had all been roped together, but the rope had broken between himself and his companions. He saw only one prostrate form, and, at some little distance, the hand of a man protruding from the white waste of snow.

The thought of affording help to the other members of the party stimulated Brian to efforts which he would not, perhaps, have made on his own account. In a short time he was able to make his way to the man lying face downwards in the snow. He had already recognised him as one of the guides. It needed but a slight examination to convince him that this man was dead—not from suffocation or cold, but from the effects of a wound inflicted in the fall. The hand sticking out of the snow belonged to the other guide; it was cold and stiff, and with all his efforts Brian could not succeed in extricating the body from the snow in which it was tightly wedged. Of the young Englishman, Gunston, and the other guide, there was absolutely nothing to be seen.

Brian turned sick and faint when the conviction was forced upon him that he would see his friend no more. His limbs failed him; he could not go on. He was born to misfortune, he said to himself; born to bring trouble and sorrow upon his companions and friends. Without him, Gunston would not, perhaps, have attempted this ascent. And how could he carry home to Gunston's family the story of his death?

After all, it was very unlikely that he would reach the bottom of the mountain in safety. He had no guide; he was utterly ignorant of the way. There were pitfalls without number in his path—crevasses, precipices, treacherous ice-bridges, and slippery, loose snow. He would struggle on until the end came, however; better to move, even towards death, than to lie down and perish miserably of cold.

It is said sometimes that providence keeps a special watch over

children and drunken men; that is to say, that those who are absolutely incapable of caring for themselves do sometimes, by wonderful good fortune, escape the dangers into which sager persons are apt to fall. So it seemed with Brian Luttrell. For hours he struggled onwards, sore pressed by cold, and fatigue, and pain; but at last, long after night had fallen, he staggered into a little hamlet on the southern side of the mountain, footsore and fainting, indeed, but otherwise unharmed.

Nobody noticed his arrival very much. The villagers took him in, put him to bed, and gave him food and drink, but they did not seem to think that he was one of "the rich Englishmen" who sometimes visited their village, and they did not at all realise what he had done. To make the descent that Brian had done without a guide would have appeared to them little short of miraculous.

Brian had no opportunity of explaining to them how he had come. He was carried insensible into the one small inn that the village contained and put to bed, where he woke up delirious and quite unable to give any account of himself. When his mind was again clear, he remembered that it was his duty to tell the story of the accident on the mountain, but as soon as he uttered a few words on the subject he was met by an animated and circumstantial account of the affair in all its details. Two Englishmen, and two guides, and a porter had been crossing the mountain when the avalanche took place; a guide and a porter had been killed, and their bodies had been recovered. One Englishman had been killed also, and the other——

"Yes, the other," began Brian, hurriedly, but the innkeeper stolidly continued his story. The other had made his way back with the guide to the nearest town. He was there still, and had been making expeditions every day upon the mountain to find the dead body of his friend. But he had given up the search now, and was returning to England on the morrow. He had done all he could, poor gentleman, and it was more than a week since the accident took place.

Brian suddenly put his head down on his pillow and lay still. Here was the chance for which his soul had yearned! If the innkeeper spoke the truth, he — Brian Luttrell — was already numbered amongst the dead. Why should he take the trouble to come back to life?

"Were none of the Englishman's clothes or effects found?" he asked, presently.

"Oh, yes, monsieur. His pocket-book—his hat. They were close to a dangerous crevasse. A guide was lowered down it for fifty, eighty, feet, but nothing of the unfortunate Englishman

was to be seen. If he did not fall into the crevasse his body may be recovered in the spring—but hardly before. Yes, his pocket-book and his hat, monsieur." A sudden gleam came into the little innkeeper's eyes, and he spoke somewhat interrogatively—"Monsieur arrived here also without his hat?"

For the first time the possibility occurred to the innkeeper's mind of his guest's identity with the missing Englishman. Brian answered with a certain reluctance; he did not like the part that he would have to play.

"I lost my way in walking from V——," he said, mentioning a town at some distance from the mountain-pass by which he had really come; "and my hat was blown off by a gust of wind. The weather was not good. I lost my way."

"True, monsieur. There was rain and there was wind: doubtless monsieur wandered from the right track," said the innkeeper, accepting the explanation in all good faith.

When he left the room, Brian examined his belongings with care. Nothing in his possession was marked, owing to the fact that his clothes were mostly new ones, purchased with a view to mountaineering requirements. His pocket-book was lost. Mrs. Luttrell's letter and one or two other papers, however, remained with him, and he had sufficient money in his pockets to pay the innkeeper and preserve him from starvation for a time. He wondered that nobody had reported an unknown traveller to be lying ill in the village; but it was plain that his escape had been thought impossible. Even Gunston had given him up for lost. As he learnt afterwards, it was believed that he had not been able to sever the rope, and that he, with one of the guides, had fallen into a crevasse. The rope went straight down into the cleft, and he was believed to be at the end of it. There was not the faintest doubt in the mind of the survivors but that Brian Luttrell was dead. It remained for Brian himself to decide whether he should go back to the town, reclaim his luggage, and take up life again at the point where he seemed to have let it drop—or go forth into the world, penniless and homeless, without a name, without a hope for the future, and without a friend.

Which should he do?

CHAPTER XII.

THE HEIRESS OF STRATHLECKIE.

"ELIZABETH an heiress! Elizabeth with a fortune of her own!" said Mrs. Heron. "It is perfectly incredible."

"It is perfectly true," rejoined her step-son. "And it has been true for the last three days."

"Then Elizabeth does not know it," replied Kitty.

"As to whether she knows it or not," said Percival, sardonically, "I am quite unable to form any opinion. Elizabeth has a talent for keeping secrets."

He was not sorry that the door opened at that moment, and that Elizabeth, entering with little Jack in her arms, must have heard his words. She flashed a quick look at him—it was one that savoured of reproach—and advanced into the middle of the room, where she stood silent, waiting to be accused.

It was twelve o'clock on the morning of a bright, cold November day. Mrs. Heron was lying on the sofa in the dining-room—a shabbily-comfortable, old-fashioned room where most of the business of the house was transacted. Kitty sat on a low chair before the fire, warming her little, cold hands. She had a cat on her lap, and a novel on the floor beside her, and looked very young, very pretty, and very idle. Percival was fidgetting about the room with a glum and sour expression of countenance. He was evidently much out of sorts, both in body and mind, for his face was unusually sallow in tint, and there was a dark, upright line between his brows which his relations knew and—dreaded. The genial, sunshiny individual of a few evenings back had disappeared, and a decidedly bad-tempered young man now took his place.

Mrs. Heron's pretty, pale face wore an unaccustomed flush; and as she looked at Elizabeth the tears came into her blue eyes, and she pressed them mildly with her handkerchief. Elizabeth waited in patience; she was not sure of the side from which the attack would be made, but she was sure that it was coming. Percival, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, leaned against a sideboard, and looked at her with disfavour. She was paler than usual, and there were dark lines beneath her eyes. What made her look like that? Percival thought to himself. One might fancy that she had been lying awake all night, if the thing were not (under the circumstances) well-nigh impossible! But perhaps it was only her ill-fitting, unbecoming, old, serge gown that made her look so pale. Percival was in the humour to see all her faults and defects that morning.

"Why do you carry that great boy about?" he said, almost harshly. "You know that he is too big to be carried. Do put him down."

"Yes, put him down, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Heron, still pressing her handkerchief to her eyes. "I am sure I have no desire to inflict any hardship upon you. If you devoted yourself to my

children, I thought that it was from choice and because you had an affection for your uncle's family. But you seem to have had no affection—no respect—no confidence——"

A gentle sob cut short her words.

"What have I done?" said Elizabeth. Her face had turned a shade paler than before, but betrayed no sign of confusion. "Lie still, Jack; I do not mean to put you down just yet. Indeed, I think I had better carry you upstairs again." She left the room swiftly, pausing only at the door to add a few words: "I will be down again directly. I shall be glad if Percival will wait."

There was a short silence, during which Mrs. Heron dried her eyes, and Percival stared uncomfortably at the toe of his left boot.

"Surely Elizabeth has a right to her own secrets," said Kitty, from her station on the hearth. But nobody replied.

Presently Elizabeth came down again, with a couple of letters in her hand. It seemed almost as if she had been upstairs to rub a little life and colour into her face, for her cheeks were carnation when she returned, and her eyes unusually bright.

"Will you tell me what I have done that distresses you?" she said, addressing herself steadily to Mrs. Heron, though she saw Percival glance eagerly, hungrily, towards the letters in her hand.

"Indeed, I have no right to be distressed," replied Mrs. Heron, still, however, in an exceedingly hurt tone. "Your own affairs are your own property, my dear Lizzie, as Kitty has just remarked; but, considering the care and—the—the affection—lavished upon you here——"

She stopped short; Percival's dark eyes were darting their angry lightning upon her.

"A care and affection," he said, "which condemned her to the nursery in order that she might indulge her extreme love for children, and save you the expense of a nursery-maid."

"You have no right to make such a remark, Percival!" exclaimed his step-mother, feebly, but she quailed beneath the sneer instead of resenting it. Elizabeth turned sharply upon her cousin.

"No," she said, "you have no right to make such a remark. As you know very well, I had no friends, no money, no home, when Uncle Alfred brought me here. I was a beggar—I should have starved, perhaps—but for him. I owe him everything—and I do not forget my debt.'

"Everything," said Percival, incisively, "except, I suppose, your confidence."

She turned away and walked up to Mrs. Heron's sofa. Here her manner changed, it became soft and womanly; her voice took a gentler tone. "What is it, Aunt Isabel?" she said. "I am ready to give you all the confidence that you wish for. I will have no secrets from you."

"Oh, then, Lizzie, is it true?" said Kitty, upsetting the cat in her haste, and flying across the room to her cousin's side, while Mrs. Heron, taken by surprise, did nothing but sob helplessly and hold Elizabeth's firm, white hand in a feeble grasp. "Is it really true? Have you inherited a great fortune? Are you going to be very rich?

Elizabeth made a little pause before she answered the question. "Brian Luttrell is dead," she said at last, rather slowly. "And I am very sorry."

"And the Luttrells are your cousins? And you are the heiress after them?"

"Yes."

"But when did you know this first?" said Kitty, anxiously looking up into her tall cousin's face.

"Yes, when did you know it first?" repeated Mrs. Heron, with a weak and sighing attempt at solemnity.

"I knew that I was the Luttrells' cousin all my life," said Elizabeth. There was a touch of perversity in her answer.

"Yes—yes. But when did you know that you were the next heir—or heiress? You cannot have known that all your life," said Mrs. Heron.

"I did not know that until a few days ago. I had a letter from a lawyer when Brian Luttrell went abroad. Mr. Brian Luttrell wished him to communicate with me and to tell me——"

"Well?" said Mrs. Heron, curiously. "To tell you what?"

"That it was probable that the property would come to me," Elizabeth answered, for the first time with some embarrassment, "as he did not intend to marry. And that he wished to settle a certain sum upon me—in case I might be in want of money now."

"And that was a fortnight ago?" said Percival.

"Yes," said Elizabeth, without looking at him, "nearly a fortnight ago."

"This is very interesting," said Mrs. Heron, who was languidly brightening as she heard Elizabeth's story and recognised the fact that substantial advantages were likely to accrue to the household from Elizabeth's good fortune. "And of course you accepted the offer, Lizzie dear? But why did you not tell us at once?"

"I waited until things should be settled. The matter might

have fallen through. It did not seem worth while to mention it until it was settled," said Elizabeth.

"How much did he offer you? Mr. Brian Luttrell must have been a very generous man."

"I think he was—very generous." said Elizabeth, looking up warmly. "I considered the matter for some time, and I wished that I could accept his kindness, but——"

"You don't mean to say that you refused it?"

"I did not refuse it altogether," explained Elizabeth, her face glowing. "I told him my circumstances, and all that my uncle had done for me, and that if he chose to place a sum of money at my uncle's disposal—I thought that, perhaps, it would be only right, and that I ought not to place an obstacle in the way. But I could not take anything for myself."

There was a little pause.

"Oh, Lizzie, how good you are!" cried Kitty, softly.

Percival took a step nearer; his face looked very dark.

"And, pray, what did the lawyer say to your proposition?" he inquired.

"He said he must communicate with Mr. Brian Luttrell, but he thought that there would be no objection to it on his part," said Elizabeth. "But he had not time to do so, you see. Brian Luttrell is dead. Here are all the letters about it, Aunt Isabel, if you want to see them. I was going to speak to Uncle Alfred this very day."

"Well, Lizzie," said Mrs. Heron, taking the letters from her niece's hand, "I am glad that we are honoured by your confidence at last. I think it would have been better, however, if you had told us a little earlier of poor Mr. Luttrell's kindness, and then other people could have managed the business for you. Of course, it would have been repugnant to your feelings to accept money for yourself, and another person could have accepted it in your name with a much better grace."

"But that is what I wanted to avoid," said Elizabeth, with a smile. "I would not have taken one penny for myself from Mr. Brian Luttrell, but if he would have repaid my uncle for part of what he has done for me——"

Her sentence came to an abrupt end. Percival had turned aside and flung himself into an arm-chair near the fire. He was the picture of ill-humour; and something in his face took away from Elizabeth the desire to say more. Mrs. Heron read the letters complacently, and Kitty put her arm round her cousin's waist and tried to draw her towards the hearth-rug for a gossip. But Elizabeth preserved her position near Mrs. Heron's sofa, although she looked down at the girl with a smile.

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"I know what Isabel meant—what we all meant," said Kitty, "when we were so disagreeable to you a little time ago, Lizzie. We all felt that we could not for one moment have kept a secret from you, and we resented your superior self-control. Fancy your knowing all this for the last fortnight, and never saying a word about it! Tell me in confidence, Lizzie, now didn't you want to whisper it to me, under solemn vows of secrecy?"

"I'm afraid you would never have kept your vows," said Elizabeth. "I meant to tell you very soon, Kitty."

"And so you are a rich woman, Elizabeth!" observed Mrs. Heron, putting down the letters and smoothing out her dress. "Dear me, how strangely things come round! Who would have dreamt, ten years ago, that you would ever be richer than all of us—richer than your poor uncle, who was then so kind to you! Some people are very fortunate!"

"Some people deserve to be fortunate, Isabel," said Kitty, caressing Elizabeth's hand, in order to soften down the effect of Mrs. Heron's sub-acid speech. But Elizabeth did not seem to be annoyed by it. She was thinking of other things.

"I am sure that if any one deserves it, Elizabeth does," said Mrs. Heron, recovering her usual placidity of demeanour. "She has always been good and kind to everyone around her. I tremble to think of what will become of dear Harry, and Will, and Jack."

"What should become of them?" said Kitty, in a startled tone.

"When Elizabeth leaves us"—Mrs. Heron murmured, applying her handkerchief to her eyes—"the poor children will know the difference."

"But you won't leave us, will you, Elizabeth?" cried Kitty, clinging more closely to her cousin, and looking up to her with tears in her eyes. "You wouldn't go away from us, after living with us all these years, darling? Oh, I thought that you loved us as if you were really our own sister, and that nothing would ever take you away!"

Still Elizabeth did not speak. Kitty's brown head rested on her shoulder, and she stroked it gently with one hand. Her lips were very grave, but her eyes, as she raised them for a moment to Percival's face, had a smile hidden in their hazel depths—a smile which he could not understand, and which, therefore, made him angry. He rose and stood on the hearth-rug with his hands behind him, as he delivered his little homily for Kitty's benefit.

"I suppose you do not expect that Elizabeth will care to sacrifice herself all her life for us and the children," he said. "It would be as unreasonable of you to ask it as it would be foolish

of her to do it. Of course, she will now begin to enjoy the world a little. She has had few enough enjoyments, hitherto—we need not grudge them to her now."

But one would have thought that he himself, grudged them to her considerably.

"What do you mean to do, Lizzie?" said Kitty, dolefully, "shall you take a house in town? or will you go and live in Scotland—all that long, long way from us? And shall you"—lifting her face rather wistfully—"shall you keep any horses and dogs?"

Elizabeth laughed; she could not help it, although her laugh brought an additional pucker to the forehead of one of her hearers, who could not detect the tremulousness that lurked behind the clear, ringing tones.

"It is well for you to laugh," he said, gloomily, "and, of course, you have the right, but——"

"How interesting it will be," Mrs. Heron's pensive voice was understood to murmur, when Percival's gruff speech had come to a sudden conclusion, "to notice the use dear Lizzie makes of her wealth! I wonder what her income will be, and whether the Luttrells' kept up a large establishment."

"Oh," said Elizabeth, suddenly loosening herself from Kitty's arms and standing erect before them with a face that paled and eyes that deepened with emotion, "does it not occur to you through what trouble and misery this 'good fortune,' as you call it, has come to me? Does it not seem wrong to you to plan what pleasure I can get out of it, when you think of that poor mother sitting at home and mourning over her two sons—two young, strong men—dead in the very prime of life? And Miss Vivian, too, with her spoiled life and her shattered hopes—she once expected to be the mistress of the very house that they now call mine! I hate the thought of it. Please never speak to me as if it were a matter for congratulation. I should be heartily glad—heartily thankful—if Brian Luttrell were alive again!"

She sat down, and put her elbows on the table and her hands over her face. The others looked at her in amaze. Percival turned to the fire and stared into it very hard. Mrs. Heron, who was rather afraid of what she called "Elizabeth's high-flown moods," murmured a suggestion to Kitty that she ought to go to the children, and glided languidly away, beckoning her step-daughter to follow her.

Percival did not speak until Elizabeth raised her face, and then he was uncomfortably conscious that she had been crying—at least, that her long eyelashes were wet, and that in other circumstances he might have felt a desire to kiss the tears away. But

this desire, if he had it, must now be carefully controlled. He did not look at her, therefore, when he spoke.

"Your feeling is somewhat overstrained, Elizabeth. We are all sorry for the Luttrells' trouble; but it is absurd to say that we must not be glad of your good fortune."

Elizabeth rose up with her eyes ablaze and her cheeks on fire.

"You know that you are not glad!" she said, almost passionately. "You know that you would rather see me poor—see me the nursery-maid, the Cinderella, that you are so fond of calling me!"

"Well," said Percival, with a short laugh, "for my own sake, perhaps, I would."

"And so would I," said Elizabeth.

"But you know, Lizzie, you will get over that feeling in time. You will find pleasure in your riches and your beauty; you will learn what enjoyment means—which you have had small chance of finding out, hitherto, in this comfortable household!" He laughed rather bitterly. "You are in the chrysalis state at present; you don't know what it is to be a butterfly. You will like that better—in time."

"I will never be a butterfly—God helping me!" said Elizabeth. She spoke solemnly, with a noble light in her whole face which made it more than beautiful. Percival turned away his eyes from it; he did not dare to look. "If I have had wealth given me," said the girl, "I will use it for worthy ends. Others shall benefit by it as well as myself."

"Don't squander it, Lizzie," said Percival, with a cynical smile, designed to cover the exceeding sadness and soreness of his heart. "Your philanthropist is not often the wisest person in the world."

"No, but I will try to use it wisely," she said, with a touch of meekness in her voice which made him feel madly inclined to fall down and kiss the very hem of her garment—or rather the lowest flounce of her shabby, dark-blue, serge gown—"and my friends will see that I do not spend it foolishly. You do not think it would be foolish to use it for the good of others, do you, Percival? I suppose I shall be thought very eccentric if I do not take a large house in London, or go much into society; but, indeed, I should not be happy in spending money in those ways——"

"Why, what on earth do you mean to do?" said Percival, sharply. "I see that you have some plan in your head; I should just like to know what it is."

She was standing beside him on the hearth-rug, and she looked up at his face and down again before she answered.

"Yes," she said, seriously, "I have a plan."

"And you mean that I have no right to inquire what it is? You are perfectly correct; I have no right, and I beg your pardon for the liberty that I have taken. I think that I had better go."

His manner was so restless, his voice so uneven and so angry, that Elizabeth lifted her eyes and studied his face a little before she replied.

"Percival," she said at last, "why are you so angry with me?"

"I'm not angry with you."

"With whom or with what, then?"

"With circumstances, I suppose. With life in general," he answered, bitterly, "when it sets up such barriers between you and me."

"What barriers?"

"My dear Elizabeth, you used to have faculties above those of the rest of your sex. Don't let your new position weaken them. I have surely not the least need to tell you what I mean."

"You overrate my faculties," said Elizabeth. "You always did. "I never do know what you mean unless you tell me. I am not good at guessing."

"You need not guess then; I'll tell you. Don't you see that I am in a very unfortunate position? I said to you the other night that I—I loved you, that I would teach you to love me; and I could have done it, Elizabeth! I am sure that you would have loved me in time."

"Well?" said Elizabeth, softly. Her lips were slightly tremulous, but they were smiling, too.

"Well!" repeated her cousin. "That's all. There's an end to it. Do you think I should ever have breathed a word into your ear if I had known what I know now?"

"The fact being," said Elizabeth, "that your pride is so much stronger than your love, that you would never tell a woman you loved her if she happened to have a few pounds more than you."

"Exactly so," he answered, stubbornly.

"Then—as a matter of argument only, Percival—I think you are wrong."

"Wrong, am I? Do you think that a man likes to take gifts from his wife's hands? Do you think it is pleasant for me to hear you offer compensation to my father for the trifle that he has spent on you during the last few years, and not to be in a position to render such an offering unnecessary? I tell you it is the most galling thing in the world, and, if for one moment you thought me capable of speaking to you as I did the other night, now that I know you to be a wealthy woman, I could never look

you in the face again. If I seem angry you must try to forgive me; you know me of old—I am always detestable when I am in pain—as I am now."

He struck his foot angrily against the fender; his handsome face was drawn and lined with the pain of which he spoke.

"Be patient, Percival," she said, with a smile which seemed to mock him by its very sweetness. "As you say to me, you may think differently in time."

"And what if I do think differently? What good will it be?" he asked her. "I am not patient; I am not resigned to my fate, and I never shall be; does it make the loss of my hopes any easier to bear when you tell me that I shall think differently in time? You might as well try to make a man with a broken leg forget his pain by telling him that in a hundred years' time he will be dead and buried!"

The tears stood in her eyes. She seemed startled by the intense energy with which he spoke; her next words scarcely rose above a whisper. "Percival," she said, "I don't like to see you suffer."

"Then I will leave you," he said, sternly. "For, if I stay, I can't pretend that I do not feel the pain of losing you."

He turned away, but before he had gone two steps a hand was placed upon his arm.

"I can't let you go in this way," she said. "Oh, Percival, you have always been good to me till now. I can't begin a new life by giving you pain. Don't you understand what I want to say?"

He put his hand on her shoulder and looked into her face. The deep colour flushed his own, but hers was white as snow, and she was trembling like a leaf.

"Do you love me, Elizabeth?" he said.

"I don't know," she answered, simply, "but I will marry you, Percival, if you like."

"That is not enough. Do you love me?"

"Too well," she answered, "to let you go."

And so he stayed.

CHAPTER XIII.

SAN STEFANO.

When the vines were stripped of their clusters, and the ploughed fields stood bare and brown in the autumnal sun—when the fig trees lost their leaves, and their white branches took on that peculiarly gaunt appearance which characterises them as soon as the wintry winds begin to blow—a solitary

traveller plodded wearily across the Lombardy plains, asking, as he went, for the road that would lead him to the village and monastery of San Stefano.

He arrived at his destination on an evening late in November. It was between five and six o'clock when he came to the little, white village, nestling in a cleft of the hills, with the monastery on a slope behind it. There was a background of mountainous country — green, and grey, and purple — with solemn, white heights behind, stretching far into the crystal clearness of the sky. As the traveller reached the village he looked up to those white forms, and saw them transfigured in the evening light. The sky behind them changed to rose colour, to purple, violet, even to delicate pale-green and golden, and, when the daylight had faded, an afterglow tinged the snowy summit with a roseate flush more tenderly ethereal than the tint of an oleander blossom, as transient as a gleam of April sunshine, or the changing light upon a summer sea. Then a dead whiteness succeeded; the day was gone, and, quick as lightning, the stars began to quiver in the blueness of the sky.

The lights in the cottage windows gleamed not inhospitably, but the traveller passed them by. His errand was to the monastery of San Stefano, for there he fancied that he should find a friend. He had no reason to feel sure about it, but he was in a mental region where reason had little sway. He was governed by vague impulses and instincts which he did not care to controvert. He was faint, footsore, and weary, but he would not pause until he had reached the monastery gates.

He rang the bell with a trembling hand. Its clangour startled him, and nearly made him fly from the place. If he had been less weak at that moment he would have turned away; as it was, he leaned against the high, white wall with an intolerable sense of discomfort and fatigue. When the porter came and looked out, it took him several minutes to discern, through the gathering darkness, the worn figure in waiting beside the gate.

"I have come a long distance," stammered the traveller, in answer to the porter's exclamation. "I want rest and food. I was told by one of you—one who was called Brother Dino, I believe—that you gave hospitality to travellers——"

"Come in, amico," said the porter, genially. "No explanations are needed when one comes to San Stefano. So you know our Brother Dino, do you? He is here again now, after two or three years in Paris. A fine scholar, they say, and a credit to the monastery. Come to the guest-room and I will tell him that you are here."

To this monologue the stranger answered not a word. The porter had meanwhile allowed him to enter, and fastened the gate once more. He then led the way up a garden path to a second door, swinging his lantern and jingling his keys as he went. The traveller followed slowly; his battered felt hat was drawn low over his forehead, his garments, torn and travel-stained, gave the porter an impression that his pockets were not too well filled, and that he might even be glad of a little employment on the farm which the Brothers of San Stefano were so successful in cultivating. His tone was none the less cheery and polite as he ushered the stranger into a long panelled room, where a single oil-lamp threw a vague, uncertain light upon the tessellated floor and plain oak furniture.

"You would like some polenta?" he said, as the wearied man sank into one of the wooden chairs with an air of complete exhaustion. "Or some of our good red wine? I will see about it directly. The signor can repose here until I return; I will fetch one of the Reverend Fathers by-and-bye, but they are all at Benediction at this moment."

"I want to see Brother Dino," said the stranger, lifting his head. And then the porter changed his mind about the station of the visitor.

That slightly imperious tone, the impatient glance of the dark eye, the unmistakably foreign accent, convinced him that he had to do with one of the tourists—English or American signori—who occasionally paid a visit to San Stefano. The porter himself was a lay-brother, and prided himself on his knowledge of the world. He answered courteously that Brother Dino should be informed, and then withdrew to provide the refreshment of which the stranger evidently stood in need.

Brother Dino was not long in coming. He entered quickly, with a look of subdued expectation upon his face. A flash of joy and recognition leaped into his eyes as he beheld the wayworn figure in one of the antique carved oak chairs. His hands, which had been crossed and hidden in the wide sleeves of the habit that he wore, went out to the stranger with a gesture of welcome and delight.

"Mr. Luttrell!" he exclaimed. "You are here already at San Stefano! We shall welcome you warmly, Mr. Luttrell!"

The name seemed wonderfully familiar to his tongue. Brian, who had risen, held out his hands also, and the young monk caught them in his own; but Brian's gesture was an involuntary one, conveying more of apprehension than of greeting.

"Not that name," he said, breathlessly. "Call me by any other that you please, but not that. Brian Luttrell is dead."

Brother Dino shivered slightly, as if a cold breath of air had passed through the ill-lighted room, but he held Brian's hands with a still warmer pressure, and looked steadily into his haggard, hollow eyes.

"What shall I call you, then, my brother?" he said, gently.

"I have thought of a name," replied Brian, in curiously uncertain, faltering tones; "it will harm nobody to take it, because he is dead, too. Remember, my name is Stretton—John Stretton, an Englishman—and a beggar."

Therewith he loosed his hands from Brother Dino's clasp, uttered a short laugh—it was a moan rather than a laugh, however—and fell like a stone into the Italian's arms. Dino supported him for a moment, then laid him flat upon the floor, and was about to summon help, when, turning, he came face to face with the Prior, Padre Cristoforo.

Thirteen years had passed since Padre Cristoforo brought the friendless boy from Turin to the monastery amongst the pleasant hills. Those thirteen years had apparently transformed the smiling, graceful lad into a pale, grave-faced, young monk, whose every word and action seemed to be subordinated to the authority of the ecclesiastics with whom he lived. Time had thrown into strong relief the keenly intellectual contour of his head and face; it had hollowed his temples and tempered the ardour of those young, brave eyes; but there was more beauty of outline and sweetness of expression than had been visible even in the charming boyish face that had won all hearts when he came to San Stefano at ten years old.

Thirteen years had changed Father Cristoforo but little. His tonsured head showed a fringe of greyer hairs, and his face was a little more blanched and wrinkled than it used to be; but the bland smile, the polished manner, the look of profound sagacity, were all the same. He gave one glance to Dino, one glance to the prostrate form upon the floor, and took in the situation without a moment's delay.

"Fetch Father Paolo," he said, after inspecting Brian's face and lifting his nerveless hand; "and return with him yourself. We may want you."

Father Paolo, the monk who took charge of the infirmary, soon arrived, and gave it as his opinion that the stranger was suffering from no ordinary fainting-fit, but from an affection of the brain. A bed was prepared for him in the infirmary, and a lay-brother appointed to attend upon him. Brian Luttrell could not have fallen ill in a place where he would receive more tender care.

It was not until the sick man was laid in his bed that Father Cristoforo spoke again to Dino, who was standing a little behind

him, holding a lamp. The rays of light fell full upon Brian's deathlike face, and on the black and white crucifix that hung above his bed on the yellow wall. Dino's face was in deep shadow when the Prior turned and addressed him.

"What was he saying when I came in? That his name was John—John——"

"John Stretton, an Englishman," answered Dino, in an unmoved voice. "An Englishman and a beggar."

Padre Christoforo did an unusual thing. He took the lamp from Brother Dino's hand and threw the light suddenly upon the young man's impassive countenance. Dino raised his great, serious eyes to the Prior's face, and then dropped them to the ground. Otherwise not a muscle of his face moved. He was the living image of submission.

"Have you seen him before?" said Padre Cristoforo.

"Twice, Reverend Father. Once on the boat between Cologne and Mainz; and once, for a moment only, in the quadrangle of the Cathedral at Mainz."

"And then did he bear his present name?"

For a moment Dino's mouth twitched uneasily. A faint colour crept into his cheeks. "Reverend Father," he said, hesitatingly, "I did not ask his name."

The priest raised the lamp to the level of his head, and again looked penetratingly into his pupil's face. There was a touch of wonder, of pity, perhaps also of some displeasure, expressed in this fixed gaze. It lasted so long that Dino turned a little pale, although he did not flinch beneath it. Finally, the Prior lowered the lamp, gave it back to him, and walked away in silence, with his head lowered and his hands behind his back. Dino followed to light him down the dark corridors, and at the door of the Prior's cell, fell on his knees, as the custom was in the monastery, to receive the Prior's blessing. But, either from forgetfulness or some other reason which passed unexplained, Padre Cristoforo entered and closed the door behind him, without noticing the young man's kneeling figure. It was the first time such an omission had occurred since Dino came to San Stefano. Was it merely an omission and not a punishment? Dino had, for the first time in his life, evaded a plain answer to a question, and concealed from Padre Cristoforo something which Padre Cristoforo would certainly have thought that he ought to know. Had Padre Cristoforo divined the truth?

According to the notions current amongst Italians, and particularly amongst many members of their church, Dino felt himself justified in equivocating in a case where absolute truth would not have served his purpose. His conscience did not reproach him for

want of truthfulness, but it did for want of confidence in Padre Cristoforo. For he loved Padre Cristoforo; and Padre Cristoforo loved him.

Brian Luttrell's illness was a long and severe one. He lay insensible for some time, and awoke to wild delirium, which lasted for many days. The Brothers of San Stefano nursed him with the greatest care, and it was observable that the Prior himself spent a good deal of time in the patient's room, and showed unusual interest in his progress towards recovery. The Prior understood English; but if he had hoped to gather any information concerning Brian's history from the ravings of his delirium he was mistaken. Brian's mind ran upon the incidents of his childhood, upon the tour that he had made with his father when he was a boy, upon his school-days; not upon the sad and tragic events with which he had been connected. He scarcely ever mentioned the names of his mother or brother. Like Falstaff, when he lay a-dying, he "babbled of green fields," and nothing more.

At one time he grew better; then he had a relapse, and was very near death indeed; but at last the power of youth re-asserted itself, and he came slowly back to life once more. But it was as a man who had been in another world; who had faced the bitterness of death and the darkness of the grave.

He was as much startled when he looked at himself for the first time in a looking-glass as a girl who has lost her beauty after a virulent attack of small-pox. Not that he had ever had much beauty to boast of; but the look of youth and hope which had once brightened his eyes was gone; his cheeks were sunken, his temples hollow, his features drawn and pinched with bodily pain and weakness. And—greatest change perhaps of all—his hair had turned from brown to grey; an alteration so striking and visible that, as he put down the little mirror which had been brought to him, he murmured to himself, with a bitter smile—"My own mother would not know me now." And then he turned his face away from the light, and lay silent and motionless for so long a space of time that the lay-brother who waited on him thought that he was sleeping.

When he rose from his bed and was able to sit in the sunny garden or the cloisters, spring had come in all its tender glow of beauty, and sent a thrill of fresh life through the sick man's veins.

Nature had always been dear to Brian. He loved the sights and sounds of country life. The hills, the waving trees, tranquil skies and running water calmed and refreshed his jaded brain and harrassed nerves. The broad fields, crimsoning with anemones, purpling with hyacinth and auricula; the fresh green

of the fig trees, the lovely tendrils of the newly shooting vines even the sight of the oxen with their patient eyes, and the homely, feathered creatures of the farmyard, clucking and strutting at the sandalled feet of the black-robed, silent, lay-brothers who brought them food—all these things acted like an anodyne upon Brians stricken heart. There was a life beside that of feeling; a life of passive, peaceful repose; the life of "stocks and stones," and happy, unresponsive things, amidst which he could learn to bear his burden patiently.

He saw little of Dino during his illness; but, as soon as he was able to go into the garden, Dino was permitted to accompany him. It was plain from his manner that no unwillingness on his own part kept him away. The English stranger had evidently a great attraction for him; he waited upon his movements and followed him, silently and affectionately, like a dog whose whole heart has been given to its master. Brian felt the charm of this devotion, but was too weak to speculate concerning its cause. He was conscious of the same kind of attraction towards Dino; he knew not why, but he found it pleasant to have Dino at his side, to lean on his arm as they went down the garden path together, to listen to the young Italian's musical accents as he read aloud at the evening hour. But what was the secret of that indefinable mutual attraction, that almost magnetic power, which one seemed to possess over the other, Brian Luttrell could not tell. Perhaps Dino knew.

This friendship did not pass unobserved. It was quietly, gently, fostered by the Prior, whose keen eyes were everywhere, and seemed to see everything at once. He it was who dispensed Dino from his usual duties that he might attend upon the English guest, who smiled benignly when he met them together in the cloister, who dropped a word or two expressive of his pleasure that Dino should have an opportunity of practising his knowledge of the English tongue. Dino could speak English with tolerable fluency, although with a strong foreign accent.

But the quiet state of affairs did not last very long. As Brian's strength returned he grew restless and uneasy; and at length one day he sent a formal request to the Prior that he might speak to him alone. Padre Cristoforo replied by coming at once to the guest-chamber, which Brian occupied in the daytime, and by asking in his usual mild and kindly way what he could do for him.

The guest-room was a bare enough place, but the window commanded a fine view of the wide plain on which the monastery looked down. The blinds were open, for the morning was

deliciously cool, and the shadows of the leaves that clustered round the lattice played in the glow of sunshine on the floor. Brian was standing as the Prior entered the room; his wasted figure, worn face, and grey hairs made him a striking sight in that abode of peace and country quietness. It was as though some unquiet visitant from another world had strayed into an Italian Arcadia. But, as a matter of fact, Brian was probably less worldly in thought and aspiration, at that moment than the serene-browed priest who stood before him and looked him in the face with such benignant friendly interest.

"You wished to see me, my son?" he began, gently.

"I am ashamed to trouble you," said Brian. "But I felt that I ought to speak to you as soon as possible. I am growing strong enough to continue my journey—and I must not trespass on your hospitality any longer."

"Your strength is not very great as yet," said the Prior, courteously. "Pray take a seat, Mr. Stretton. We are only too pleased to keep you with us as long as you will do us the honour to remain, and I think it is decidedly against your own interests to travel at present."

Brian stammered out an acknowledgment of the Prior's kindness. He was evidently embarrassed, even painfully so; and Padre Cristoforo found himself watching the young man with some surprise and curiosity. What was it that troubled this young Englishman?

Brian at last uttered the words that he had wished to say.

"If I remained here," he said, colouring vividly with a sensitiveness springing from the reduced physical condition to which he had been brought by his long illness; "if I remained here I should ask you whether I could do any work for you—whether I could teach any of your pupils English or music. I am a poor man; I have no prospects. I would as soon live in Italy as in England—at any rate for a time."

The Prior looked at him steadily; his deeply-veined hand grasped the arm of his wooden chair, a slight flush rose to his forehead. It was in a perfectly calm and unconstrained voice, however, that he made answer.

"It is quite possible that we might find work of the kind you mention, signor—if you require it."

There was a subdued accent of inquiry in the last four words. Brian laughed a little, and put his hand in his pocket, whence he drew out four gold pieces and a few little Swiss and Italian coins.

"You see these, Father?" he said, holding them out in the palm of his hand. "They constitute my fortune, and they are due to the institution that has sheltered me so kindly and nursed

me back to life and health. I have vowed these coins to your alms-box; when they are given, I shall make a fresh start in the world—as the architect of my own fortunes."

"You will then be penniless?" said the priest, in rather a curious tone.

"Entirely so."

There was a short silence. Brian's fingers played idly with the coins, but he was not thinking about them; his dreamy eyes revealed that his thoughts were very far away. Padre Cristoforo was biting his forefinger and knitting his brows—two signs of unusual perturbation of mind with him. Presently, however, his brow cleared; he smoothed his gown over his knees two or three times, coughed once or twice, and then addressed himself to Brian with all his accustomed urbanity.

"Our Order is a rich one," he said, with a smile, "and one that can well afford to entertain strangers. I will not tell you to make no gifts, for we know that it is very blessed to give—more blessed than to receive. I think it quite possible that we can give you such work as you desire. But before I do so, I think I am justified in asking you with what object you take it?"

"With what object? A very simple one—to earn my daily bread."

"And why," said the priest leaning forward and speaking in a lower voice—"why should your father's son need to earn his daily bread in a little Italian village?"

Again Brian's face changed colour.

"My father's son?" he repeated, vaguely. The coins fell to the ground; he sat up and looked at the Prior suspiciously. "What do you know about my father?" he said. "What do you know about me?"

The Prior pushed back his chair. A little smile played upon his shrewd yet kindly face. The Englishman was easier to manage than he had expected to find him, and Father Cristoforo was unquestionably relieved in his mind.

"I do not know much about you," he said, "but I have reason to believe that your name is not Stretton—that you were recently travelling under the name of Brian Luttrell, and that you have a special interest in the village of San Stefano. Is that not true, my friend?"

"Yes," said Brian slowly. "It is true."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PRIOR'S OPINION.

THE Prior's face wore an expression of mild triumph. He was evidently prepared to be questioned, and was somewhat surprised

when Brian turned to him gravely and addressed him in cold and serious tones.

"Reverend Father," he said, "I am ignorant of the way in which you have possessed yourself of my secret, but, before a word more is spoken, let me tell you at once that it is a secret which must be kept strictly and sacredly between ourselves, unless great trouble is to ensue. It is absolutely necessary now that Brian Luttrell should be—dead."

"What has Brian Luttrell done," asked the Prior, "that he should be ashamed of his own name?"

"Ashamed!" said Brian, haughtily; "I never for one moment said that I was ashamed of it; but——"

He turned in his chair and looked out of the window. A new thought occurred to him. Probably Padre Cristoforo knew the history of every one who had lived in San Stefano during the last few years. Perhaps he might assist Brian in his search for the truth. At any rate, as Padre Cristoforo already knew his name, it would do nobody any harm if he confided in him a little further, and told him something of the story which Mrs. Luttrell had told to him.

Meanwhile, Padre Cristoforo watched him keenly as a cat watches a mouse, though without the malice of a cat. The Prior wished Brian no harm. But, for the good of his Order, he wished very much that he could lay hands, either through Brian or through Dino, upon that fine estate of which he had dreamt for the last thirteen years.

"Father Cristoforo," Brian's haggard, dark eyes looked anxiously into the priest's subtilely twinkling orbs, "will you tell me how you learnt my true name?"

He could not bear to cast a doubt upon Dino's good faith, and the Prior divined his reason for the question.

"Rest assured, my dear sir, that I learnt it accidentally," he said, with a soothing smile. "I happened to be entering the door when our young friend Dino recognised you. I heard you tell him to call you by the name of Stretton; I also heard you say that Brian Luttrell was dead."

"Ah!" sighed Brian, scarcely above his breath. "I thought that Dino could not have betrayed me."

He did not mean the Prior to hear his words; but they were heard and understood. "Signor," said the Padre, with an inflection of hurt feeling in his voice, "Mr. Stretton, or Mr. Luttrell, however you choose to term yourself, Dino is a man of honour, and will never betray a trust reposed in him. I could answer for Dino with my very life."

"I know—I was sure of it!" cried Brian.

"But, signor, do you think it is right or wise to imperil the future and the reputation of a young man like Dino—without friends, without home, without a name, entirely dependent upon us and our provision for him—by making him the depository of secrets which he keeps against his conscience and against the rule of the Order in which he lives? Brother Dino has told me nothing; he even evaded a question which he thought that you would not wish him to answer; but he has acted wrongly, and will suffer if he is led into further concealment. Need I say more?"

"He shall not suffer through me," said Brian, impetuously. "I ought to have known better. But I was not myself; I don't remember what I said. I was surprised and relieved when I came to myself and found you all calling me Mr. Stretton. I never thought of laying any burden upon Dino."

"You will do well, then," said the Prior, approvingly, "if you do not speak of the matter to him at all. He is bound to mention it if questioned, and I presume you do not want to make it known."

"No, I do not. But I thought that he was bound only to mention matters that concerned himself; not those of other people," said Brian, with more hardihood than the priest had expected of him.

Padre Cristoforo smiled, and made a little motion with his hand, as much as to say that there were many things which an Englishman and a heretic could not be expected to know. "Dino is in a state of pupilage," he said, slightly, finding that Brian seemed to expect an answer; "the rules which bind him are very strict. But—if you will allow me to advert once more to your proposed change of name and residence—I suppose that it is not indiscreet to remark that your friends in England—or Scotland—will doubtless be anxious about your place of abode at present?"

"I do not think so," said Brian, in a low tone. "I believe that they think me dead."

"Why so?"

"Perhaps you did not hear in your quiet monastery, Father, of a party of travellers who perished in an avalanche last November? Two guides, a porter, and an Englishman, whose body was never recovered. I was that Englishman."

"I heard of the accident," said Padre Cristoforo, briefly, nodding his head. "So you escaped, signor? You must have had strong limbs and stout sinews—or else you must have been attended by some special providential care—to escape, when those three skilled mountaineers were lost on the mountain-side."

"On ne meurt pas quand la mort est la délivrance," quoted Brian, with a bitter laugh. "You may be quite sure that if I had been at the height of felicity and good fortune, it would have needed but a false step, or a slight chill, or a stray shot—a stray shot! oh, my God! If only some stray shot had come to me—not to my brother—my brother——"

They were the first tears that he had shed since the beginning of his illness. The sudden memory of his brother's fate proved too much for him in his present state of bodily weakness. He bowed his head on his hands and wept.

A curiously soft expression stole into the Prior's face. He looked at Brian once or twice and seemed as if he wished to say some pitying word, but, in point of fact, no word of consolation occurred to him. He was very sorry for Brian, whose story was perfectly familiar to him; but he knew very well that Brian's grief was not one to which words could bring comfort. He waited silently, therefore, until the mood had passed, and the young man lifted up his heavy eyes and quivering lips with a faint attempt at a smile, which was sadder than those passionate sobs had been.

"I must ask pardon," he said, somewhat confusedly. "I did not know that I was so weak. I will go to my room."

"Let me delay you for one moment," said the Prior, confronting him with kindly authority. "It has needed little penetration, signor, to discover that you have lately passed through some great sorrow; I am now more sure of it than ever. I would not intrude upon your confidence, but I ask you to remember that I wish to be your friend—that there are reasons why I should take a special interest in you and your family, and that, humble as I am, I may be of use to you and yours."

Brian stopped short and looked at him. "Me and mine!" he repeated to himself. "Me and mine! What do you know of us?"

"I will be frank with you," said the priest. "Thirteen years ago a document of a rather remarkable nature was placed in my hands affecting the Luttrell family. In this paper the writer declared that she, as the nurse of Mrs. Luttrell's children, had substituted her own child for a boy called Brian Luttrell, and had carried off the true Brian to her mother, a woman named Assunta Naldi. The nurse, Vincenza, died and left this paper in the hands of her mother, who, after much hesitation, confided the secret to me."

Brian took a step nearer to the Prior. "What right have you had to keep this matter secret so long?" he demanded.

"Say, rather, what right had I to disturb an honourable family with an assertion that is incapable of proof?"

"Then why did you tell me now?"

"Because you know it already."

Brian seated himself and leaned back in his chair, with his eyes still fixed upon the Prior's face.

"Why do you think that I know it?" he said.

"Because," said Padre Cristoforo, raising his long forefinger, and emphasising every fresh point with a convincing jerk, "because you have come to San Stefano. You would never have come here unless you wanted to find out the truth. Because you have changed your name. You would have had no reason to abandon the name of Luttrell unless you were not sure of your right to bear it. Because you spoke of Vincenza in your delirium. Do I need more proofs?"

There was another proof which he did not mention. He had found Mrs. Luttrell's letter to Brian amongst the sick man's clothes, and had carefully perused it before locking it up with the rest of the stranger's possessions. It was characteristic of the man that, during the last few years, he had set himself steadily to work to master the English language by the aid of every English book or English-speaking traveller that came in his way. He had succeeded wonderfully well, and no one but himself knew for what purpose that arduous task had been undertaken. He found his accomplishment useful; he had thought it particularly useful when he read Mrs. Luttrell's letter. But naturally he did not say so to Brian.

"You are right," said Brian, in a low voice. "But you say it is incapable of proof. She—my mother—I mean Mrs. Luttrell—says so, too."

"If it were capable of proof," said the Prior, softly, "should you contest the matter?"

"Yes," Brian answered, with an angry flash of his eyes, "if I had been in England, and any such claimant appeared, I would have fought the ground to the last inch! Not for the sake of the estates—I have given those up easily enough—but for my father's sake. I would not lightly give up my claim to call him father; he never doubted once that I was his son."

"He never doubted?"

"I am sure he never did."

"But Mrs. Luttrell——"

"God help me, yes! But she thinks also that I meant to take my brother's life."

It needed but a few words of inquiry to lead Brian to tell the story of his brother's death. The Prior knew it well enough; he had made it his business to ascertain the history of the Luttrell family during the past few years; but he listened with the gentle

and sympathetic interest which had often given him so strong a hold over men's hearts and lives. He was a master in the art of influencing younger men; he had the subtle instinct which told him exactly what to say and how far to go, when to speak and when to be silent; and Brian, with no motive for concealment, now that his name was once known, was like a child in the Prior's hands.

In return for his confidence, Padre Cristoforo told him the substance of his interview with old Assunta, and of the confession written by Vincenza. But when Brian asked to see this paper the Prior shook his head.

"I have not got it here," he said. "It was certainly preserved, by the desire of some in authority, but it was not thought to afford sufficient testimony."

"What was wanting?"

"I cannot tell you precisely what was wanting; but, amongst other matters, there is the fact that this Vincenza made a directly opposite statement, which counterbalances this one."

"Then you have two written statements, contradicting each other? You might as well throw them both into the fire," said Brian, with some irritation. "Who is the 'authority' who preserves them? Can I not present myself to him and demand a sight of the documents?"

"Under what name, and for what reason, would you ask to see them?"

Brian winced; he had for the moment forgotten what his own hand had done.

"I could still prove my identity," he said, looking down. "But, no; I will not. I did not lose myself upon the mountain-side because of this mystery about my birth, but because I wanted to escape my mother's reproaches and the burden of Richard's inheritance. Nothing will induce me to go back to Scotland. To all intents and purposes, I am dead."

"Then," said the Prior, "since that is your resolution—your wise resolution, let me say—I will tell you frankly what my reading of the riddle has been, and what, I think, Vincenza did. It is my belief that Mrs. Luttrell's child died, and was buried under the name of Vincenza's child."

"You, too, then—you believe that I am not a Luttrell?"

"If the truth could ever be ascertained, which I do not think it will be, I believe that this would turn out to be the case. The key of the whole matter lies in the fact that Vincenza had twins. One of these children was sent to the grandmother in the country; one was nursed in the village of San Stefano. A fever had broken out in the village, and Vincenza's charge—the little Brian

Luttrell—died. She immediately changed the dead child for her own, being wishful to escape the blame of carelessness, and retain her place; also to gain for her own child the advantages of wealth and position. The two boys, who have now grown to manhood, are brothers; children of one mother; and Brian Luttrell—a baby boy of some four months old—sleeps, as his mother declares, in the graveyard of San Stefano."

"Why did the nurse confess only a half-truth, then?"

"She wanted to get absolution; and yet she did not want to injure the prospects of her child, I suppose. At the worst, she thought that one boy would be substituted for another. The woman was foolish—and wicked," said the Prior, with a grain of impatient contempt in his tone; "and the more foolish that she did not observe that she was outwitting herself—trying to cheat God as well as man."

"Then—you think—that I——"

"That you are the son of an Italian gardener and his wife. Courage, my son; it might have been worse. But I know nothing positively; I have constructed a theory out of Vincenza's self-contradictions; it may be true; it may be false. Of one thing I would remind you; that as you have given up your position in England and Scotland, you have no responsibility in the matter. You have done exactly what the law would have required you to do had it been proved that you were Vincenza's son."

"But the other child—the boy who was sent to his grandmother? What became of him?"

The Prior looked at him in silence for a little time before he spoke. "How do you feel towards him?" he said, finally. "Are you prepared to treat him as a brother or not?"

Brian averted his face. "I have had but one brother," he said, shortly. "I cannot expect to find another—especially when I am not sure that he is of my blood or I of his."

"In any case he is your foster-brother I should like you to meet him."

"Does he know the story?"

"He does."

"And is prepared to welcome me as a brother?" said Brian, with a bitter but agitated laugh. "Where is he? I will see him if you like."

He had risen to his feet, and stood with his arms crossed, his brow knitted, his mouth firmly set. There was something hard in his face, something defiant in his attitude, which caused the Prior to add a word of remonstrance. "It is not his fault," he said, "any more than it is yours. You need not be enemies; it is my object to make you friends."

"Let me see him," repeated Brian gloomily. "I do not wish to be his enemy. I do not promise . . s his friend."

"I will send him to you," said the Prior. "Wait here till he comes."

He left Brian alone; and the young man, thinking it likely that he would be undisturbed for some time to come, bent his face upon his hands, and tried to review his position. The strange tangle of circumstances in which he found himself involved would never be easy of adjustment; he wished with all his heart that he had refused the Prior's offer to make his foster-brother known to him, but it was too late now. Was it too late? Could he not send for Padre Cristoforo, and beg him to leave the Italian peasant in his own quiet home, ignorant of Brian's visit to the place where he was born? He would do it; and then he would leave San Stefano for ever; it was not yet too late.

He lifted up his head and rose to his feet. He was not alone in the room. To his surprise he saw before him his friend, Dino.

"You have come from Padre Cristoforo, have you?" said Brian, quickly and impetuously. He took no notice of the young man's manifest agitation and discomfort, which would have been clear to anybody less pre-occupied than Brian at that moment. "Tell him from me that there is no need for me to see the man that he spoke of—that I do not wish to meet him. He will understand what I mean."

A change, like that produced by a sudden electric shock, passed over Dino's face. His hands fell to his sides. They had been outstretched before, as if in greeting.

"You do not want to see him?" he repeated.

"I will not see him," said Brian, harshly, almost violently. "Weak as I am, I'll go straight out of the house and village sooner than meet him. Why does he want to see me? I have nothing to give him now."

Long afterwards he remembered the look on Dino's face. Pain, regret, yearning affection, seemed to struggle for the mastery; his eyes were filled with tears, his lips were pale. But he said nothing. He went away from the room, and took the message that had been given him to the Prior.

Brian felt that he had perhaps been selfish, but he consoled himself with the thought that the peasant lad would gain nothing by a meeting with him, and that such an embarrassing interview, as it must necessarily be, would be a pain to them both.

But he did not know that the foster-brother (brother or foster-brother, which could it be?) was sobbing on the floor of the Prior's cell, in a passion of vehement grief at Brian's rejection of Padre

Cristoforo's proposition. He would scarcely have understood that grief if he had seen it. He would have found it difficult to realise that the boy, Dino, had grown from childhood with a strong but suppressed belief in his mother's strange story, and yet, that, as soon as he saw Brian Luttrell, his heart had gone out to him with the passionate tenderness that he had waited all his life to bestow upon a brother.

"Take it not so much to heart, Dino mio," said the Prior, looking down at him compassionately. "It was not to be expected that he would welcome the news. Thou art a fool, little one, to grieve over his coldness. Come, these are a girl's tears, and thou should'st be a man by now."

The words were caressingly spoken, but they failed of their effect. Dino did not look up.

"For one reason," said the Prior, in a colder tone, half to himself and half to the novice, "I am glad that he has not seen you. Your course will, perhaps, be the easier. Because, Dino, although I may believe my theory to be the correct one, and that you and our guest are both the children of Vincenza Vasari, yet it is a theory which is as difficult to prove as any other; and our good friend, the Cardinal, who was here last week, you know, chooses to take the other view."

"What other view, Reverend Father?" said Dino.

"The view that you are, indeed, Brian Luttrell, and not Vincenza's son."

"But—you said—that it was impossible to prove——

"I think so, my dear son. But the Cardinal does not agree with me. We shall hear from him further. I believe it is the general opinion at Rome that you ought to be sent to Scotland in order to claim your position and the Luttrell estates. The case might at any rate be tried."

Dino rose now, pale and trembling.

"I do not want a position. I do not want to claim anything. I want to be a monk," he said.

"You are not a monk yet," returned the Prior, calmly. "And it may not be your vocation to take the vows upon you. Now, do you see why you have been prevented from taking them hitherto? You may be called upon to act as a layman; to claim the estates, fight the battle with these Scotch heretics and come back to us a wealthy man! And in that case, you will act as a pious layman should do, and devote a portion of your wealth to Holy Church. But I do not say you would be successful; I think myself that you have little chance of success. Only let us feel that you are our obedient child, as you used to be."

"I will do anything you wish, cried Dino, passionately, "so long as I bring no unhappiness upon others. I do not wish to be rich at Brian's expense."

"He has renounced his birthright, said the Prior. "You will not have to fight him, my tender-hearted Dino. You will have a much harder foe—a woman. The estate has passed into the hands of a Miss Elizabeth Murray."

CHAPTER XV.

THE VILLA VENTURI.

An elderly English artist, with carefully-trimmed grey hair, a gold-rimmed eye-glass, and a velvet coat which was a little too hot as well as a little too picturesque for the occasion, had got into difficulties with his sketching apparatus on the banks of a lovely little river in North Italy. He had been followed for some distance by several children, who had never once ceased to whine for alms; and he had tried all arts in the hope of getting rid of them, and all in vain. He had thrown small coins to them; they had picked them up and clamoured only the more loudly; he had threatened them with his sketching umbrella, whereat they had screamed and run away, only to return in the space of five seconds with derisive laughter and hands outstretched more greedily than ever. When he reached the spot where he intended to make a sketch, his tormentors felt that they had him at their mercy. They swarmed round him, they peeped under his umbrella, they even threw one or two small stones at his back; and when, in desperation, their victim sprang up and turned upon them, they made a wild dash at his umbrella, which sent it into the stream, far beyond the worthy artist's reach. Then they took to their heels, leaving the good man to contemplate wofully the fate of his umbrella. It had drifted to the middle of the stream had there been caught by a stone and a tuft of weed, and seemed destined to complete destruction. He tried to arrest its course, but could not reach it, and nearly over-balanced himself in the attempt; then he sat down upon the bank and gave vent to an ejaculation of mild impatience—"Oh, dear, dear, dear me! I wish Elizabeth were here."

It was so small a catastrophe, after all, and yet it called up a look of such unmistakable vexation to that naturally tranquil and abstracted countenance, that a spectator of the scene repressed a smile which had risen to his lips and came to the rescue.

"Can I be of any assistance to you, sir?" he said.

The artist gave a violent start. He had not previously seen the

speaker, who had been lying on the grass at a few yards' distance, screened from sight by an intervening clump of brushwood. He came forward and stood by the water, looking at the opened umbrella.

"I think I could get it," he said. "The water is very shallow."

"But—my dear sir—pray do not trouble yourself; it is entirely unnecessary. I do not wish to give the slightest inconvenience," stammered the Englishman, secretly relieved, but very much embarrassed at the same time. "Pray, be careful—it's very wet. Good Heaven!" The last exclamation was caused by the fact that the new-comer had calmly divested himself of his boots and socks and was stepping into the water. "Indeed, it's scarcely worth the trouble that you are taking."

"It is not much trouble to wade for a minute or two in this deliciously cool water," said the stranger, with a smile, as he returned from his expedition, umbrella in hand. "There, I think you will find it uninjured. It's a wonder that it was not broken. You would have been inconvenienced without it on this hot day."

He raised his hat slightly as he spoke and moved away. The artist received another shock. This young man—for he moved with the strength and lightness of one still young, and his face was a young face, too—this young man had grey hair—perfectly grey. There was not a black thread amongst it. For one moment the artist was so much astonished that he nearly forgot to thank the stranger for the service that he had rendered him.

"One moment," he said, hurriedly. "Pray allow me to thank you. I am very much obliged to you. You don't know how great a service you have done me. If I can be of any use to you in any way——"

"It was a very trifling service," said the young man, courteously. "I wish it had been my good fortune to do you a greater one. This was nothing."

"Foreign!" murmured the artist to himself, as the stranger returned to his lair behind the thicket, where he seemed to be occupying himself in putting on his socks and boots once more. "No Englishman would have answered in that way. I wish he had not disappeared so quickly. I should like to have made a sketch of his head. Hum! I shall not sketch much to-day, I fancy."

He shut up his paint-box with an air of resolution, and walked leisurely to the spot where the young man was completing his toilet. "I ought perhaps to explain," he began, with an air which he fancied was Machiavellian in its simplicity, "that the loss of that umbrella would have been a serious matter to me,

It might have entailed another and more serious loss—the loss of my liberty."

The young man looked up with a puzzled and slightly doubtful expression. "I beg your pardon," he said. "The loss of——"

"The loss of my liberty," said the Englishman, in a louder and rather triumphant tone of voice. "The fact is, my dear sir, that I have a very tender and careful wife, and an equally tender and careful daughter and niece, who have so little confidence in my power of caring for my own safety that they have at various times threatened to accompany me in all my sketching expeditions. Now, if I came home to them and confessed that I had been attacked by a troop of savage Italian children, who tossed my umbrella into the river, do you think I should ever be allowed to venture out alone again?"

The young man smiled, with a look of comprehension.

"Can I be of any further use to you?" he said. "Can I walk back to the town with you, or carry any of your things?"

"You can be of very great use to me, indeed," said the gentleman, opening his sketch-book in a great hurry, and then producing a card from some concealed pocket in his velvet coat. "I'm an artist—allow me to introduce myself—my name is Heron; you would be of the very greatest use to me if you would allow me to—to make a sketch of your head for a picture that I am doing just now. It is the very thing—if you will excuse the liberty that I am taking——"

He had his pencil ready, but he faltered a little as he saw the sudden change which came over his new acquaintance's face at the sound of his proposition. The young man flushed to his temples, and then turned suddenly pale. He did not speak, but Mr. Heron inferred offence from his silence, and became exceedingly profuse in his apologies.

"It is of no consequence," said the stranger, breaking in upon Mr. Heron's incoherent sentences with some abruptness. "I was merely surprised for the moment; and, after all—I think I must ask you to excuse me; I have a great dislike—a sort of nervous dislike—to sitting for a portrait. I would rather that you did not sketch me, if you please."

"Oh, certainly, certainly; I am only sorry that I mentioned it," said Mr. Heron, more formally than usual. He was a little vexed at his own precipitation, and also by the way in which his request had been received. For a few moments there was a somewhat awkward silence, during which the young man stood with his eyes cast down, apparently absorbed in thought. "A striking face," thought Mr. Heron to himself, being greatly attracted by the appearance of his new friend; "all the more

picturesque on account of that curious grey hair. I wonder what his history has been." Then he spoke aloud and in a kindlier tone. "I will accept your offer of help," he said, "and ask you to walk back with me to the town, if you are going that way. I came by a short cut, which I am quite sure that I shall never remember."

The young man awoke from his apparently sad meditations; his fine, dark eyes were lightened by a grateful smile as he looked at Mr. Heron. It seemed as though he were glad that something had been suggested that he could do. But the smile was succeeded by a still more settled look of gloom.

"I must introduce myself," he said. "I have no card with me—perhaps this will do as well." He held out the book that he had been reading; it was a copy of Horace's *Odes*, bound in vellum. On the fly-leaf a name had been scrawled in pencil—John Stretton. Mr. Heron glanced at it through his eye-glass, nodded pleasantly, and regarded his new friend with increased respect.

"You're a scholar, I see," he said, good-humouredly, as they strolled leisurely towards the little town in which he had told John Stretton that he was staying; "or else you would not bring Horace out with you into the fields on a sunshiny day like this. I have forgotten almost all my classical lore. To tell the truth, Mr. Stretton, I never found it very much good to me; but I suppose all boys have got to have a certain amount of it drilled into them——!" He stopped short in an interrogative manner.

"I suppose so," said Stretton, without a smile. His eyes were bent on the ground; there was a joyless contraction of his delicate, dark brows. It was with an evident effort that he suddenly looked up and spoke. "I have an interest in such subjects. I am trying to find pupils myself—or, at least, I hope to find some when I return to England in a week or two. I think," he added with a half-laugh, "that I am a pretty good classic—good enough, at least, to teach small boys!"

"I dare say, I dare say," said Mr. Heron, hastily. He looked as if he would like to put another question or two, then turned away, muttered something inaudible, and started off upon a totally different subject, about which he laid down the law with unaccustomed volubility and decision. Stretton listened, assented now and then, but took care to say little in reply. A sudden turn in the road brought them close to a fine, old building, grey with age, but stately still, at the sight of which Mr. Heron became silent and slackened his pace.

"A magnificent old place," said Stretton, looking up at it as his companion paused before the gateway.

"Picturesque, but not very waterproof, said Mr. Heron, with a dismal air of conviction. "It is what they call the Villa Venturi. There are some charming bits of colour about it, but I am not sure that it is the best possible residence."

"You are residing here?"

"For the present—yes. You must come in and see the banqueting-hall and the terrace; you must, indeed. My wife will be delighted to thank you herself—for the rescue of the umbrella!" and Mr. Heron laughed quietly below his breath. "Yes, yes"—as Stretton showed symptoms of refusing—"I can take no denial. After your long, hot walk with me, you must come in and rest, if it is but for half-an-hour. You do not know what pleasure it gives me to have a chat with some one like yourself, who can properly appreciate the influence of the Renaissance upon Italian art."

Stretton yielded rather than listen to any more of such gross and open flattery. He followed Mr. Heron under the gateway into a paved courtyard, flanked on three sides by out-buildings and a clock tower, and on the fourth by the house itself. Mr. Heron led the way through some dark, cool passages, expatiating as he went upon the architecture of the building; finally they entered a small but pleasant little room, where he offered his guest a seat, and ordered refreshments to be set before him.

"I am afraid that everyone is out," Mr. Heron said, after opening and shutting the doors of two or three rooms in succession, and returning to Stretton with rather a discomfited countenance. "The afternoon is growing cool, you see, and they have gone for a drive. However, you can have a look at the terrace and the banqueting-hall while it's still light, and we shall hope for the pleasure of your company at some other time when my wife is at home, Mr. Stretton, if you are staying near us."

"You are very kind," murmured Stretton. "But I fear that I must proceed with my journey to-morrow. I ought not to stay—I must not——"

He broke off abruptly. Mr. Heron forgot his good manners, and stared at him in surprise. There was something a little odd about this grey-haired young man after all. But, after a pause, the stranger seemed to recover his self-possession, and repeated his excuses more intelligibly. Mr. Heron was sorry to hear of his probable departure.

They wandered round the garden together. It was a pleasant place, with terraced walks and shady alcoves, so quaint and trim that it might well have passed for that fair garden to which Boccaccio's fine ladies and gallant cavaliers fled when the plague raged in Florence, or for the scene on which the hapless Francesca

looked when she read the story of Lancelot that led to her own undoing. Some such fancies as these passed through the crannies of Stretton's mind while he seemed to be listening to Mr. Heron's mildly-pedantic allocutions, and absorbed in the consideration of mediæval art. Mr. Heron was in raptures with his listener.

"Oh, by-the-bye," said the artist, suddenly, as they paused beside one of the windows on the terrace, "if I may trouble you to wait here a minute, I will go and fetch the sketch I have made of the garden from this point. You will excuse me for a moment. Won't you go inside the house? The window is open—go in, if you like."

He disappeared into another portion of the house, leaving Stretton somewhat amused by his host's unceremonious demeanour. He did not accept the invitation; he leaned against the wall rather languidly, as though fatigued by his long walk, and tried to make friends with a beautiful peacock which seemed to expect him to feed it, and yet was half-afraid to approach.

As he waited, a gentle sound, of which he had been conscious ever since he halted close to the window, rose more distinctly upon his ear. It was the sound of a voice engaged in some sort of monotonous reading or reciting, and it seemed first to advance to the window near which he stood and then to recede. He soon discovered that it was accompanied by a soft but regular foot-fall. It was plain that somebody—some woman, evidently—was pacing the floor of the room to which this window belonged, and that she was repeating poetry, either to herself or to some silent listener. As she came near the window, Stretton heard the words of an old ballad with which he was himself familiar—

"I saw the new moon, late yestreen,
Wi' the old moon in her arm;
And if we gang to sea, master,
I fear we'll come to harm."

The voice died away as it travelled down the space of the long room. Presently it came nearer; the verses were still going on—

"Oh, lang, lang may the ladies sit,
With their fans intil their hand,
Before they see Sir Patrick Spens
Come sailing to the strand.

And lang, lang may the maidens sit,
With their gowd kaims in their hair,
A' waiting for their ain dear loves,
For them they'll see nae mair."

"Betty," said a feeble little voice—a child's voice, apparently

quite close to the window now—"I want you to say those two verses over again; I like them. And the one about the old moon with the new moon in her arms; isn't that pretty?"

"You like that, do you, my little Jack?" said the woman's voice; a rich, low voice, so melodious in its loving tones that Stretton positively started when he heard it, for it had been carefully subdued to monotony during the recitation, and he had not realised its full sweetness. "Do you know, darling, I thought that you were asleep?"

"Asleep, Betty? I never go to sleep when you are saying poetry to me. Aren't you tired of carrying me?"

"I am never tired of carrying you, Jack."

"My own dear, sweet Queen Bess!" There was the sound of a long, loving kiss; and then the slow pacing up and down and the recitation re-commenced.

Stretton had thought that morning that nothing could induce him to interest himself again in the world's affairs; but at that moment he was conscious of the strongest possible feeling of curiosity to see the owner of so sweet a voice. The slightest movement on his part, the slightest possible push given to the window, which opened into the room like a door and was already ajar, would have enabled him to see the speakers. But he would not do this. He told himself that he ought to move away from the window, but self-government failed him a little at that point. He could not lose the opportunity of hearing that beautiful voice again. "It ought to belong to a beautiful woman," he thought, with a half smile, "but, unfortunately, Nature's gifts are distributed very sparingly sometimes. This girl, whosoever she may be—for I know she is young—has a lovely voice, and probably a crooked figure or a squint. I suppose she is Mr. Heron's daughter. Ah, here he comes!"

The artist's flying grey beard and loose velvet coat were seen upon the terrace at this moment. "I cannot find the sketch," he cried, dolorously. "The servants have been tidying the place whilst I was out—confound them! You must positively stop over to-morrow and see it. This is the banqueting-room—why didn't you go in?" And he pushed wide the window which the young man had refrained from opening a single inch.

A flood of light fell on a yard or two of polished oak flooring; but at first Stretton could see nothing more, for the rest of the room seemed to be in complete darkness to his dazzled eyes. The blinds of the numerous windows were all drawn down, and some minutes elapsed before he could distinguish any particular object in the soft gloom of the apartments. And then he saw that Mr. Heron was speaking to a lady in white, and he discovered at once,

with a curious quickening of his pulses, that the reciter of the ballad stood before him with a child in her arms.

She was beautiful, after all! That was Stretton's first thought. She was as stately as a queen, with a natural crown of golden-brown hair upon her well-poised head; the grand lines of her figure were emphasized by the plainness of her soft, white dress, which fell to her feet in folds that a sculptor might have envied. The only ornament she wore was a string of Venetian beads round the milky whiteness of her throat, but her beauty was not of a kind that required adornment. It was like that of a flower—perfect in itself, and quite independent of exterior aid. In fact, she was not unlike some tall and stately blossom, or so Stretton thought, no exotic flower, but something as strong and hardy as it was at the same time delicately beautiful. Her eyes had the colouring that one sees in the iris-lily sometimes—a tint which is almost grey, but merges into purple; eyes, as the poet says—

"Too expressive to be blue,
Too lovely to be grey."

In her arms she carried little Jack Heron, and by the way in which she held him, it was plain that she was well accustomed to the burden, and that his light weight did not tire her well-knit, vigorous limbs. His pale, little face looked wistfully at the stranger; it was a curious contrast to the glowing yet delicate beauty and perfect health presented by the countenance of his cousin Elizabeth.

Meanwhile, Mr. Heron was introducing the stranger, which he did with a note of apology in his voice, which Stretton was not slow to remark. But Elizabeth—he did not catch her name, and still thought her to be a Miss Heron—soon put him at his ease. She accompanied the artist and his friend round the banqueting-hall, as they inspected the fine, old pictures with which it was hung; she walked with them on the terrace—little Jack still cradled in her arms; and wheresoever she went, it seemed to Stretton that he had never in all his life seen any woman half so fair.

He did not leave the house, after all, until late that night. He dined with the Herons; he saw Mrs. Heron, and Kitty, and the boys; but he had no eyes nor ears for anyone but Elizabeth. He did not know why she charmed him; he knew only that it was a pleasure to him to see and hear her slightest word and movement; and he put this down to the fact that she had a sympathetic voice, and a face of undoubted beauty. But in very truth, John Stretton—alias Brian Luttrell—returned to his inn that night in the brilliant Italian moonlight, having (for the first time in his life, be it observed) fallen desperately, passionately in

love. And the woman that he loved was the heiress of the Luttrell estates; the last person in the world whom he would have dreamt of loving, had he but known her name.

CHAPTER XVI.

"WITHOUT A REFERENCE."

BRIAN—or to avoid confusion, let us call him by the name that he had adopted, Stretton—rose early, drank a cup of coffee, and was sitting in the little verandah outside the inn, looking dreamily out towards a distant view of the sea, and thinking (must the truth be told?) of Elizabeth, when a visitor was announced. He looked round, and, to his surprise, beheld Mr. Heron.

The artist was graver in manner and also a little more nervous than usual. After the first greetings were over he sank into an embarrassed silence, played with his watch-chain and his eye-glass, and, at last, burst somewhat abruptly into the subject upon which he had really come to speak.

"Mr. Stretton," he said, "I trust that you will excuse me if I am taking a liberty; but the fact is, you mentioned to me yesterday that you thought of taking pupils——"

"Yes," Stretton answered, simply. "I should be very glad if I could find any."

"We think that we could find you some, Mr. Stretton."

The young man's pale face flushed; but he did not speak. He only looked anxiously at the artist, who was pulling his pointed grey beard in a meditative fashion, and seemed uncertain how to proceed with his proposition.

"I have two boys running wild for want of a tutor," he said at last. "We shall be here some weeks longer, and we don't know what to do with them. My wife says they are too much for her. Elizabeth has devoted herself to poor little Jack (something sadly wrong with his spine, I'm afraid, Mr. Stretton). Kitty—well, Kitty is only a child herself. The point is—would it be a waste of your time, Mr. Stretton, to ask you to spend a few weeks in this neighbourhood, and give these boys two or three hours a day? We thought that you might find it worth your while."

Stretton was standing, with his shoulder against one of the vine-clad posts that supported the verandah. Mr. Heron wondered at his discomposure; for his colour changed from red to white and from white to red as sensitively as a girl's, and it was with evident difficulty that he brought himself to speak. But when he spoke the mystery seemed, in Mr. Heron's eyes, to be partly solved.

"I had better mention one thing from the very first," said the young man, quietly. "I have no references. I am afraid the lack of them will be a fatal drawback with most people."

"No references!" stammered Mr. Heron, evidently much taken aback. "But—my dear young friend—how do you propose to get a tutor's work without them?"

"I don't know," said Stretton, with a smile in which a touch of sternness made itself felt rather than seen. "I don't suppose that I shall get very much work at all. But I hope to earn my bread in one way or another."

"I—I—well, I really don't know what to say," remarked Mr. Heron, getting up, and buttoning his yellow gloves reflectively. "I should have no objection. I judge for myself, don't you know, by the face and the manner and all that sort of thing; but it's a different thing when it comes to dealing with women, you know. They are so particular——"

"I am afraid I should not suit Mrs. Heron's requirements," said Stretton, in a very quiet tone.

"It isn't that exactly," said Mr. Heron, hesitating; "and yet—well, of course, you know it isn't the usual thing to be met with the plain statement that you have no references! Not that I might even have thought of asking for them; ten to one that it would ever have occurred to me—but my wife——. Come, you don't mean it literally? You have friends in England, no doubt, but you don't want to apply to them."

"Excuse me, Mr. Heron; I spoke the literal truth. I have no references to give either as to character, attainments, or birth. I have no friends. And I agree with you and Mrs. Heron that I should not be a fit person to teach your boys their Latin accidence—that's all."

"Not so fast, if you please," said Mr. Heron, more impressed by Stretton's tone of cold independence than he would have been by sheaves of testimonials to his abilities; "not so fast, my good fellow. Now, will you do me a favour? Let me think the matter over for half-an-hour, and come to you again. Then we will decide the matter, one way or the other."

"I should prefer to consider the matter decided now," said Stretton.

"Nonsense, my dear sir, you must not be hasty. In half-an-hour I shall see you again," cried the artist, as he turned his back on the young man, and walked off towards the Villa Venturi, swinging his stick jauntily in his hand. Stretton watched him, and bit his lip.

"I was a fool to say that I wanted work," he said to himself, "and perhaps a greater fool to blurt out the fact that I had no

respectable references so easily. However, I've done for myself in that quarter. The British dragon, Mrs. Grundy, would never admit a man as tutor to her boys under these mysterious circumstances. All the better, perhaps. I should be looked upon with suspicion, as a man 'under a cloud.' And I should not like that, especially in the case of that beautiful Miss Heron, whose clear eyes seem to rebuke any want of candour or courage by their calm fearlessness of gaze. Well, I shall not meet her under false pretences now, at any rate." And then he gave vent to a short, impatient sigh, and resumed the seat that he had vacated for Mr. Heron's benefit.

He tried to read; but found, to his disgust, that he could not fix his mind on the printed page. He kept wondering what report Mr. Heron was giving to his wife and family of the interview that he had had with the English tutor "without references."

"Perhaps they think that I was civil to the father because I hoped to get something out of them," said Stretton to himself, frowning anxiously at the line of blue sea in the distance. "Perhaps they are accusing me of being a rank impostor. What if they do? What else have I been all my life? What a fool I am!"

In despair he flung aside his book, went up to his bed-room, and began to pack the modest knapsack which contained all his worldly wealth. In half-an-hour—when he had had that five minutes' decisive conversation with Mr. Heron—he would be on his way to Naples.

He had all but finished his packing when the landlord shuffled upstairs to speak to him. There was a messenger from the Villa Venturi. There was also a note. Stretton opened it and read:—

"DEAR MR. STRETTON,—Will you do me the favour to come up to the villa as soon as you receive this note? I am sorry to trouble you, but I think I can explain my motive when we meet. Yours truly,

"ALFRED HERON."

Stretton crumpled the note up in his hand, and let it drop to the floor. He glanced at his knapsack. Had he packed it too soon or not?

He followed the servant, whom he found in waiting for him—a stolid, impenetrable-looking Englishman, who led the way to an entrance into the garden of the villa—an entrance which Stretton did not know.

"Is your master in the garden? Does he wish me to come this way?" he asked, rather sharply.

The stolid servant bowed his head.

"My master desired me to take you to the lower terrace, sir, if you didn't find it too 'ot," he said, solemnly. And Stretton said nothing more. The lower terrace? It was not the terrace by the house; it was one at the further end of the garden, and, as he soon saw, it was upon a cliff overlooking the sea. It was overshadowed by the foliage of some great trees, and commanded a magnificent view of the coast, broken here and there into inlets and tiny bays, beyond which stretched "the deep sapphire of the sea." A slight haze hung over the distance, through which the forms of mountain peaks and tiny islets could yet be clearly seen. The wash of the water at the foot of the cliff, the chirp of the cicadas, were the only sounds to be heard. And here, on a low, wooden bench, in the deepest and coolest shade afforded by the trees, Stretton found—not Mr. Heron, as he had expected, but—Elizabeth.

He bowed, hesitating and confused for the moment, but she gave him her white hand with a friendly look which set him at his ease, just as it had done upon his entrance to the villa on the previous evening.

"Sit down, Mr. Stretton," she said, "will you not? My uncle has gone up to the house for a paper, or a book, or something, and I undertook to entertain you until he came back. Have we not a lovely view? And one is always cool here under the trees, now that the heats of summer are past. I think you will find it a good place to read in when you are tired of giving lessons—that is, if you are going to be so kind as to give lessons to our troublesome boys."

She had looked at him once, and in that glance she read what would have taken Mr. Heron's obtuse male intellect weeks to comprehend. She saw the young man's slight embarrassment and the touch of pride mingling with it; she noticed the spareness of outline and the varying colour which suggested recent illness, or delicacy of health; above all, she observed the expression of his face, high, noble, refined, as it had always been, but darkened by some inexplicable shadow from the past, some trace of sorrow which could never be altogether swept away. Seeing all these things, she knew instinctively that the calmest and quietest way of speaking would suit him best, and she felt that she was right when he answered, in rather low and shaken tones—

"Pardon me. It is for Mr. Heron to decide; not for me."

"I think my uncle has decided," said Elizabeth. "He asked me to ascertain when you would be willing to give the boys their first lesson."

"He said that, now? Since he saw me?" cried Stretton, as if in uncontrollable surprise.

Elizabeth's lips straightened themselves for a moment. Then she turned her face towards the young man, with the look of mingled dignity and candour which had already impressed him so deeply, and said, gently—

"Is there anything to be surprised at in that?"

"Yes," said Stretton, hanging his head, and absently pulling forward a long spray of clematis which grew beside him. "It is a very surprising thing to me that Mr. Heron should take me on trust—a man without recommendation, or influence, or friends." He plucked the spray as he spoke, and played restlessly with the leaves. Elizabeth watched his fingers; she saw that the movement was intended to disguise the fact that they were trembling. "As it is," he went on, "even though your father—I beg pardon, your uncle—admits me to this house, I doubt whether I do well to come. I think it would be better in many ways that I should decline this situation."

He let the leaves fall from his hand and rose to his feet. "Will you tell Mr. Heron what I say?" he asked, in an agitated voice. "Tell him I will not take advantage of his kindness. I will go on to Naples—this afternoon."

Elizabeth was puzzled. This was a specimen of humanity the like of which she had never met before. It interested her; though she hardly wished to interfere in the affairs of a man who was so much of a riddle to her. That he was a stranger and that he was young—not much older than herself, very probably—were facts that did not enter her mind with any deterrent force.

But as Stretton lifted his hat and turned to leave her, she noticed how white and wan he looked.

"Mr. Stretton," she said, imperiously, "please to sit down. You are not to attempt that long, hot walk again just now. Besides, you must wait to see my uncle. Sit down, please. Now, tell me, you have been ill lately, have you not?"

"Yes," said Stretton, seating himself as she bade him, and answering meekly. "I had brain fever more than a year ago at the monastery of San Stefano, and my recovery was a slow one."

"I know the Prior of San Stefano—Padre Cristoforo. Do you remember him?"

"Yes. He was very good to me. I was there for twelve months or more. He gave me work to do in the school."

"Will you mention that to my uncle? He is very fond of Padre Cristoforo."

"I thought," said Stretton, colouring a little, and almost as though he were excusing himself, "that it would be useless to give the name of a Romanist Prior as a referee to Mr. Heron. Most people would think it an objection in itself."

"Why not give English names, then?" said Elizabeth.

"Because I have no English friends."

There was a little silence. Stretton was leaning back in his seat, looking quietly out to sea; Elizabeth was sitting erect, with her hands crossed on her lap. Presently she spoke, but without turning her head.

"Mr. Stretton, I do not want you to think my remarks impertinent or uncalled for. I must tell you first that I am in a somewhat unusual position. My aunt is an invalid, and does not like to be troubled about the children; my uncle hates to decide anything for himself. They have fallen into the habit—the unlucky habit for me—of referring many practical matters to my decision, and, therefore, you will understand that my uncle came to me on his return from the inn this morning and told me what you had said. I want to explain all this, so that you may see how it is that I have heard it so quickly. No one else knows."

"You are very good," said Stretton, feeling his whole heart strengthened and warmed by this frank explanation. "I think you must see how great a drawback my absence of recommendations is likely to be to me."

"Yes," said Elizabeth, seriously, "I do. But if you cannot overcome it in this case, how are you going to overcome it at all?"

"I don't know, Miss Heron."

"You said that you wished to take pupils," Elizabeth went on, too much interested in the subject to notice the mistake made in her name; "you told my uncle so, I believe. Will you get them more easily in England than here?"

"I shall no doubt find somebody who will forego the advantages of a 'character' for the sake of a little scholarship," said Stretton, rather bitterly. "Some schoolmaster, who wants his drudgery done cheap."

"Drudgery, indeed!" said Elizabeth, softly. Then, after a pause—"That seems a great pity. And you are an Oxford man, too!"

Stretton looked up, "How do you know that?" he said, almost sharply.

"You talked of Balliol last night as if you knew it."

"You have a good memory, Miss Heron. Yes, I was at Balliol; but you will not identify me there. The truth will out, you see; I was not at Oxford under my present name."

He thought he should read a look of shocked surprise upon her face; but he was mistaken. She seemed merely to be studying him with grave, womanly watchfulness; not to be easily biassed, nor lightly turned aside.

"That is your own affair, of course," she said. "You have a right to change your name if you choose. In your own name, I dare say you would have plenty of friends."

"I had," he answered, gravely, but not, as she noticed, as if he were ashamed of having lost them.

"And you have none now?"

"Absolutely none."

"Through your own fault?" She wondered afterwards how she had the courage to ask the question; but, at the moment, it came naturally to her lips, and he answered it as simply as it was asked.

"No. Through my misfortune. Pray ask me nothing more."

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I ought not to have asked anything. But I was anxious—for the children's sakes—and there was nobody to speak but myself. I will say nothing more."

"I shall beg of you," said Stretton, trying to speak in as even a tone as hers, although the muscles round his lips quivered once or twice and made utterance somewhat difficult, "I shall beg of you to tell what I have said to Mr. Heron only; you and he will perhaps kindly guard my secret. I wish I could be more frank; but it is impossible. I trust that, when I find employment, my employers will be as kind, as generous, as you have been to-day. You will tell your uncle?"

"What am I to tell him?" she said, turning her eyes upon him with a kindly smile in their serene depths. "That you will be here to-morrow at nine o'clock—or eight, before the day grows hot? Eight will be best, because the boys get so terribly sleepy and cross, you know, in the middle of the day; and you will be able to breakfast here at half-past ten as we do."

He looked at her, scarcely believing the testimony of his own ears. She saw his doubt, and continued quietly enough, though still with that lurking smile in her sweet eyes. "You must not find fault with them if they are badly grounded; or rather you must find fault with me, for I have taught them nearly everything they know. They are good boys, if they are a little unruly now and then. Here is my uncle coming from the house. You had really better wait and see him, will you not, Mr. Stretton? I will leave you to talk business together."

She rose and moved away. Stretton stood like a statue, passionately desiring to speak, yet scarcely knowing what to say.

It was only when she gave him a slight, parting smile over her shoulder that he found his voice.

"I can't thank you," he said, hoarsely. She paused for a moment, and he spoke again, with long gaps between the sentences. "You don't know what you have done for me. . . . . I have something to live for now. . . . . God bless you."

He turned abruptly towards the sea, and Elizabeth, after hesitating for a moment, went silently to meet her uncle. She was more touched than she liked to acknowledge to herself by the young man's emotion; and she felt all the pleasurable glow that usually accompanies the doing of a good deed.

"Perhaps we have saved him from great misery—poverty and starvation," she mused to herself. "I am sure that he is good; he has such a fine face, and he speaks so frankly about his troubles. Of course, as my uncle says, he may be an adventurer; but I do not think he is. We shall soon be able to judge of his character."

"Well, Betty," said Mr. Heron, as he came up to her, "what success? Have you dismissed the young man in disgrace, or are we to let him try to instruct these noisy lads every morning?"

"I think you had better try him, uncle."

"My dear Elizabeth, it is not for me to decide the question. You know very well that I could not do what you insist upon doing for us all——"

"Don't tell Mr. Stretton that, please, uncle."

Mr. Heron stopped short, and looked at her almost piteously.

"Dear child, how can I go on pretending to be the master of this house, and hiring tutors for my children, when the expense comes out of your purse and not out of mine?"

"My purse is wide enough," said Elizabeth, laughing. "Dear uncle, I should hate this money if I might not use it in the way I please. What good would it be to me if you could not all share it? Besides, I do not want to be gossiped about and stared at, as is the lot of most young women who happen to be heiresses. I am your orphan niece—that is all that the outside world need know. What does it matter which of us really owns the money?"

"There are very few people of your opinion, my dear," said her uncle. "But you are a good, kind, generous girl, and we are more grateful to you than we can say. And now, shall I talk to this young man? Have you asked him any questions?"

"Yes. I do not think that we need reject him because he has no references, uncle."

"Very well, Elizabeth. I quite agree with you. But, on the

whole, we won't mention the fact of his having no references to the rest of the family."

"Just what I was about to say, Uncle Alfred."

Thereupon she betook herself to the house, and Mr. Heron proceeded to the bench on the cliff, where he held a long and apparently satisfactory colloquy with his visitor. And at the end of the conversation it was decided that Mr. John Stretton, as he called himself, should give three or four hours daily of his valuable time to the instruction of the more youthful members of the Heron family.

CHAPTER XVII.

PERCIVAL'S HOLIDAY.

"HEY for the South, the sunny South!" said Percival Heron, striding into his friend Vivian's room with a lighted cigar between his teeth and a letter in his hand. "I'm off to Italy to-morrow."

"I wish to Heaven that I were off, too!" returned Rupert, leaning back in a lounging-chair with a look of lazy discontent. "The fogs last all the year round in London. This is May; I don't know why I am in town at all."

"Nor I," said his friend, briskly. "Especially when you have the cash to take you out of town as often as you like, and whenever you like, while I have to wait on the tender mercies of publishers and editors before I can put fifty pounds in my pocket and go for a holiday."

"You're in luck just now, then, I am to understand?"

"Very much so. Look at that, my boy." And he flourished a piece of thin paper in Vivian's face. "A cheque for a hundred. I am going to squander it on railway lines as soon as possible."

"You are going to join your family?"

"Yes, I am going to join my family. What a sweetly domestic sound! I don't care a rap for my family. I am going to see the woman I love best in the world, and, if she were not in Italy, I doubt whether wild horses would ever draw me from this vast, tumultuous, smoky, beloved city of mine—Alma Mater, indeed, to me, and to scores of men who are your brothers and mine——"

"Now, look here, Percival," said Rupert, in a slightly wearied tone, "if you are going to rant and rave, I'll go out. My room is quite at your disposal, but I am not. I've got a headache. Why don't you go to a theatre or a music hall, and work off your superfluous energy there by clapping and shouting applause?"

Percival laughed, but seated himself and spoke in a gentler tone.

"I'll remember your susceptibilities, my friend. Let me stay and smoke, that's all. Throw a book at my head if I grow too noisy. Or hand me that 'Review' at your elbow. I'll read it and hold my tongue."

He was as good as his word. He read so long and so quietly that Vivian turned his head at last and addressed him of his own accord.

"What makes your people stay so long abroad?" he said. "Are they going to stop there all the summer? I never heard that a summer in Italy was a desirable thing."

"It's Elizabeth's doing," answered Percival, coolly. "She and my father between them got up an Italian craze; and off they went as soon as ever she came into that property, dragging the family behind them, all laden with books on Italian art, and quoting Augustus Hare, Symonds, and Ruskin indiscriminately. I don't suppose Kitty will have a brain left to stand on when she comes back again—if ever she does come back."

"What do you mean?" said Rupert, with a sudden deep change of voice.

"I mean—nothing. I mean, if she does not marry an Italian count or an English adventurer, or catch malaria and die in a swamp."

"Good Heavens, Percival! how can you talk so coolly? One would think that it was a joke!"

Vivian had risen from his chair, and was standing erect, with a decided frown upon his brow. Percival glanced at him, and answered lightly.

"Don't make such a pother about nothing. She's all right. They're in a very healthy place; a little seaside village, where it has been quite cool, they say, so far. And they will return before long, because they mean to spend the autumn in Scotland. Yes, they say it is 'quite cool' at present. Don't see how it can be cool myself; but that's their look out. They've all been very well, and there's no immediate prospect of the marriage of either of the girls with an Italian or an English adventurer; not even of Miss Murray with your humble servant."

Rupert threw himself back into his chair again as if relieved, and a half-smile crossed his countenance.

"How is Miss Murray?" he asked, rather maliciously.

"Very well, as far as I know," said Percival, turning over a page and smoothing out the "Review" upon his knee. He read on for two or three minutes more, then suddenly tossed the book from him, gave it a contemptuous kick, and discovered that his cigar had gone out. He got up, walked to the mantelpiece, found a match, and lighted it, and then said, deliberately—

"They've done a devilish imprudent thing out there."

"What?"

"Hired a fellow as tutor to the boys without references or recommendations, solely because he was good-looking, as far as I can make out."

"Who told you?"

"My father."

"Did he do it?"

"He and Elizabeth between them. Kitty sings his praises in every letter. He teaches the girls Italian."

Rupert said nothing.

"So I am going to Italy chiefly to see what the fellow is like. I can't make out whether he is young or old. Kitty calls him divinely handsome; and my father speaks of his grey hairs."

"And Miss Murray?"

"Miss Murray," said Percival, rather slowly, "doesn't speak of him at all." Then, he added, in quicker tones—"Doubtless he isn't worth her notice. Elizabeth can be a very grand lady when she likes. Upon my word, Vivian, there are times when I wonder that she ever deigned to bestow a word or look even upon me!"

"You are modest," said Rupert, drily.

"Modesty's my foible; it always was. So, Hey for the sunny South, as I said before.

> 'O, swallow, swallow, flying, flying South,
> Fly to her, and fall upon her gilded eaves,
> And tell her, tell her, what I tell to thee.'

Any message for the swallow, sir?" touching an imaginary cap. "Shall I say that 'Dark and true and tender is the North,' and 'Fierce and false and fickle is the South,' or any similar statement?"

"I have no message," said Rupert.

"So be it. Do you know anything of young Luttrell—Hugo Luttrell—by-the-bye?"

"Very little. My sister is interested in him."

"He is going to the bad at an uncommonly swift pace—that is all."

"Old Mrs. Luttrell talks of making him her heir," said Vivian. "She asked him down last winter but he wouldn't go."

"I don't wonder at it. She must be a very tough old lady if she thinks that he could shoot there with much pleasure after his cousin's accident."

"I don't suppose that Mrs. Luttrell asked him with any such notion," returned Rupert. "She merely wanted him to spend a few days with her at Netherglen."

"Has she much to leave? I thought the estates were entailed," said Percival.

"She has a rather large private fortune. I expected to find that you knew all about it," said Rupert, with a smile.

"It's the last thing that I should concern myself about," said Percival, superbly. And Vivian was almost sorry that he had made the remark, for it overset all the remains of his friend's good temper, and brought into ugly prominence the upright, black mark upon his forehead caused by his too frequent frown.

Matters were not mended when Rupert asked, by way of changing the conversation, whether Percival's marriage were to take place on Miss Murray's return to England.

"Marriage? No! What are you thinking of?" said he, starting up impatiently. "Don't you know that our engagement—such as it is—is a profound secret from the world in general? You are nearly the only person who knows anything about it outside our own family; and even there it isn't talked about. Marriage! I only wish there was a chance of it. But she is in no hurry to give up her liberty; and I can't press her."

And then he took his departure, with an injured feeling that Rupert had not been very sympathetic.

"I've a good mind to offer to go with him," said Mr. Vivian to himself when his friend was gone. "I should like to see them all again; I should like to enjoy the Italian sunshine and the fresh, sweet air with Kitty, and hear her innocent little comments on the remains of mediæval art that her father is sure to be raving about. But it is better not. I might forget myself some day. I might say what could not be unsaid. And then, poor, little Kitty, it would be hard both for you and for me. No, I won't go. Stay in Italy and get married, Kitty; that is the best thing for us both. You will have forgotten your old friend by the time you come back to London; and I shall drag on at the old round, with the same weary, clanking chain at my heels which nobody suspects. Good God!" cried Rupert, with a sudden burst of passion which would have startled the friends who had seen in him nothing but the perfectly self-possessed, cold-natured, well-mannered man of the world, "what a fool a man can make of himself in his youth, and repent it all his life afterwards in sackcloth and ashes—yet repent it in vain—in vain!'

Percival Heron did not choose to announce his coming to his friends. He travelled furiously, as it was his fashion to travel when he went abroad, and arrived at the little village, on the outskirts of which stood the Villa Venturi, so late in the evening that he preferred to take a bed at the inn, and sup there, rather

than disturb his own people until morning. He enjoyed the night at the inn. It was a place much frequented by fishermen, who came to fill their bottles before going out at night, or to talk over the events of the previous day's fishing. There was a garden behind the house—a garden full of orange and lemon trees—from which sweet breaths of fragrance were wafted to the nostrils of the guests as they sat within the little hostelry. Percival could speak Italian well, and understood the *patois* of the fishermen. He had a wonderful gift for languages; and it pleased him to sit up half the night, drinking the rough wine of the country, smoking innumerable cigarettes, and laughing heartily at the stories of the fisher-folk, until the simple-minded Italians were filled with admiration and astonishment at this *Inglese* who was so much more like one of themselves than any of the *Inglesi* that they had ever met.

Owing to these late hours and the amount of talking, perhaps, that he had got through, Percival slept late next morning, and it was not until eleven o'clock that he started, regardless of the heat, for the Villa Venturi. He had not very far to go, and it was with a light heart that he strode along holding a great, white umbrella above his head, glancing keenly at the view of sea and land which made the glory of the place, turning up his nose fastidiously at the smells of the village, and wondering in his heart what induced his relations to stay so long out of London. He rang the bell at the gateway with great decision, and told the servant to inform Mr. Heron that "an English gentleman" wished to speak to him. He was ushered into a little ante-room, requested to wait there until Mr. Heron was found, and left alone.

But he was not content to wait very patiently. He was sure that he heard voices in the next room. Being quite without the scruples which had made Stretton, not long before, refuse to push open a door one single inch in order to see what was not meant to meet his eyes, he calmly advanced to an archway screened by long and heavy curtains, parted them with his fingers, and looked in.

It was an innocent scene, and a pretty scene enough, on which his eyes rested, and yet it was one that gave Percival little pleasure. The room was not very light, and such sunshine as entered it fell through the coloured panes of a stained-glass window high in the wall. At an old oak table, black and polished with age, sat two persons—a master and a pupil. They had one book between them, and the pupil was reading from it. Papers, dictionaries, and copybooks strewed the table; it was evident that other pupils had been there before, but that they had aban-

doned the scene. Percival set his teeth, and the brightness went out of his eyes. If only the pupil had not been Elizabeth!

It was not that she showed any other feeling than that of interest in the book that she was reading. Her eyes were fixed upon the printed page; her lips opened only to pronounce slowly and carefully the unfamiliar syllables before her. The tutor was quiet, grave, reserved; but Percival noticed, quickly and jealously, that he once or twice raised his eyes as if to observe the expression of Elizabeth's fair face; and, free from all offence as that glance certainly was, it made a wild and unreasoning fury rise up in the lover's heart. He looked, he heard an interchange of quiet question and answer, he saw a smile on her face, a curiously wistful look on his; then came a scraping sound, as the chairs were pushed back over the marble floor, and master and pupil rose. The lesson was over. Percival dropped the curtain.

He was so pale when Elizabeth came to him in the little anteroom that she was startled.

"Are you not well, Percival?" she asked, as she laid her hand in his. She did not allow him to kiss her; she did not allow him to announce her engagement; and, as he stood looking down into her eyes, he felt that the present state of things was very unsatisfactory.

"I shall be better if you administer the cure," he said. "Give me a kiss, Elizabeth; just one. Remember that I have not seen you for nearly eight months."

"I thought we made a compact," she began, trying to withdraw her hand from his; but he interrupted her.

"That I should not kiss you—often; not that I should never kiss you at all, Elizabeth. And as I have come all the way from England, and have not seen you for so long, you might as well show me whether you are glad or not."

"I am very glad to see you," said Elizabeth, quietly.

"Are you? Then kiss me, my darling—only once!"

He put one arm round her. His face was very near her own, and his breath came thick and fast, but he waited for her permission still. In his own heart he made this kiss the crucial test of her faithfulness to him. But Elizabeth drew herself away. It seemed as though she found his eagerness distasteful.

"Then you don't care for me? You find that you don't love me?" said Percival, almost too sharply for a lover. "I may go back to England as soon as I like? I came only to see you. Tell me that my journey has been a useless one, and I'll go."

She smiled as she looked at him. "You have not forgotten how to be tyrannical," she said. "I hardly knew you when I first

came in, because you looked so quiet and gentle. Don't be foolish, Percival."

"Oh, of course, it is folly for a man to love you," groaned Percival, releasing her hands and taking a step or two away from her. "You have mercy on every kind of folly but that. Well, I'll go back."

"No, you will not," said Elizabeth, calmly. "You will stay here and enjoy yourself, and go for a sail in the boat with us this evening, and eat oranges fresh from the trees, and play with the children. We are all going to take holiday whilst you are here, and you must not disappoint us."

"Then you must kiss me once, Elizabeth." But Percival's face was melting, and his voice had a half-laughing tone. "I must be bribed to do nothing."

"Very well, you shall be bribed," she answered, but with a rather heightened colour upon her cheek. And then she lifted up her face; but, as Percival perceived with a vague feeling of irritation, she merely suffered him to kiss her, and did not kiss him in return.

His next proceeding was to put his father through a searching catechism upon the antecedents and abilities of the tutor, Mr. John Stretton, who was by this time almost domiciled at the Villa Venturi. Mr. Heron's replies to his son's questions were so confused, and finished so invariably by a reference to Elizabeth, that Percival at last determined to see what he could extract from her. He waited for a day or two before opening the subject. He waited and watched. He certainly discovered nothing to justify the almost insane dislike and jealousy which he entertained with respect to Mr. Stretton; when he reasoned with himself he knew that he was prejudiced and unreasonable; but then he had a habit of considering that his prejudices should be attended to. He examined the children, hoping to find that the new tutor's scholarship might give him a loophole for criticism; but he could find nothing to blame. In fact, he was driven reluctantly to admit that the tutor's knowledge was far wider and deeper than his own, although Percival was really no mean classical scholar, and valued himself upon a thorough acquaintance with modern literature of every kind. He was foiled there, and was therefore driven back upon the subject of the tutor's antecedents.

"Who is this man Stretton, Elizabeth?" he asked one day. "My father says you know all about him."

"I?" said Elizabeth, opening her eyes. "I know nothing more than Uncle Alfred does."

"Indeed. Then you engaged him with remarkably little prudence, as it appears to me."

"Prudence is not quite the highest virtue in the world."

"Now, my dear Queen Bess, as Jack calls you, don't be didactic. Where did you pick up this starveling tutor? Was he fainting by the roadside?"

"Mr. Stretton teaches very well, and is much liked by the boys, Percival. You heard Aunt Isabel tell the story of his first meeting with Uncle Alfred."

"Ah, yes; the rescue of the umbrella. Well, what else? Of course, he got somebody to introduce him in proper form after that?"

"No," said Elizabeth.

"No! Then you had friends in common? You knew his family?"

"No."

"Then how, in Heaven's name, Elizabeth, did he make good his footing here?"

There was a silence. The two were sitting upon the low bench on the cliff. It was evening, and the sun was sinking to rest over the golden waters; the air was silent and serene, Percival had been smoking, but he flung his cigar away, and looked full into Elizabeth's face as he asked the question.

She spoke at last, tranquilly as ever.

"He was poor, Percival, and we wanted to help him. You and I are not likely to think the worse of a man for being poor, are we? He had been ill; he seemed to be in trouble, and we were sorry for him; and I do not think that my uncle made a mistake in taking him."

"And I," said Percival, with an edge in his voice, "think that he made a very great mistake."

"Why?"

"Why?" he repeated, with a short, savage laugh. "I shall not tell you why."

"Do you know anything against Mr. Stretton?"

"Yes."

"What, Percival?" Her tone was indignant; the colour was flaming in her cheeks

"I know that Stretton is not his name. My father told me so." There was a pause, and then Percival went on, in a low voice, but with a gathering intensity which made it more impressive than his louder tones. "I'll tell you what I should do if I were my father. I should say to this fellow—'Now, you may be in trouble through no fault of your own, but that is no matter to me. If you cannot bear your own name, you have no business to live in an honest man's house under false pretences; you may, therefore, either tell me your whole story, and let me

judge whether it is a disgraceful one or not, or you may go—the quicker the better.' That's what I should say to Mr. Stretton; and the sooner it is said to him the more I shall be pleased."

"Fortunately," said Elizabeth, "the decision does not rest in your hands." She rose, and drew herself to her full height; her cheeks were crimson, her eyes gleamed with indignation. "Mr. Stretton is a gentleman; as long as he is in my employment —mine, if you please; not yours, nor your father's, after all—he shall be treated as one. You could not have shown yourself more ungenerous, more poor-spirited, Percival, than by what you have said to-day."

And then she walked with a firm, resolute step and head erect, towards the house. Percival did not attempt to follow her. He watched her until she was out of sight, then he re-seated himself, and sank into deep meditation. It was night before he roused himself, and struck a blow with his hand upon the arm of the seat, which sent the rotten woodwork flying, as he gave utterance to his conclusion.

"I was right after all. My father will live to own it some day. He has made a devil of a mistake."

Then he rose and took the path to the house. Before he entered it, however, he looked vengefully in the direction in which the twinkling lights of the little village inn could be seen.

"If you have a secret," he said, slowly and resolutely, from between his clenched teeth, "I'll find it out. If you have a disgraceful story in your life, I'll unmask it. If you have another name you want to hide, I'll publish it to the world. So help me, God! Because you have come, or you are coming, between me and the woman that I love. And if I ever get a chance to do you a bad turn, Mr. John Stretton, I'll do it."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MISTRESS OF NETHERGLEN.

"SHALL I go, or shall I not go?" meditated Hugo Luttrell.

He was lying on a broad, comfortable-looking lounge in one of the luxurious rooms which he usually occupied when he stayed for any length of time in London. He had been smoking a dainty, perfumed cigarette—he very seldom smoked anything except cigarettes—but he held it absently between his fingers, and finally let it drop, while he read and re-read a letter which his servant had just brought to him.

Nearly two years had passed since Richard Luttrell's death; years which had left their mark upon Hugo in many ways. The lines of his delicately beautiful, dark face had grown harder and

sharper; and, perhaps on this account, he had a distinctly older look than was warranted by his two-and-twenty years. There were worn lines about his eyes, and a decided increase of that subtlety of expression which gave something of an Oriental character to his appearance. He had lost the youthful, almost boyish, look which had characterised him two years ago; he was a man now, but hardly a man whom one would have found it easy to trust.

The letter was from Angela Vivian. She had written, at Mrs. Luttrell's request, to ask Hugo to pay them a visit. Mrs. Luttrell still occupied the house at Netherglen, and she seemed anxious for an interview with her nephew. Hugo had not seen her for many months; he had left Scotland almost immediately after Brian's departure, with the full intention of setting foot in it no more. But he had then considered himself tolerably prosperous. Brian's death had thrown a shade over his prospects. He could no longer count upon a successful application to Mr. Colquhoun if he were in difficulties, and Brian's six thousand pounds melted before his requirements like snow before an April sun. He had already squandered the greater part of it; he was deeply in debt; and he had no relation upon whom he could rely for assistance—unless it were Mrs. Luttrell, and Hugo had a definite dislike to the thought of asking Mrs. Luttrell for money.

It was no more than a dislike, however. It was an upleasant thing to do, perhaps, but not a thing that he would refrain from doing, if necessary. Why should not Mrs. Lutttell be generous to her nephew? Possibly she wished to make him her heir; possibly she would offer to pay his debts; at any rate, he could not afford to decline her help. So he must start for Netherglen next day.

"Netherglen! They are still there," he said to himself, as he stared moodily at the sheet of black-edged note-paper, on which the name of the house was stamped in small, black letters. "I wonder that they did not leave the place. I should have done so if I had been Aunt Margaret. I would give a great deal to get out of going to it myself!"

A sombre look stole over his face; his hand clenched itself over the paper that he held; in spite of the luxurious warmth of the room, he gave a little shiver. Then he rose and bestirred himself; his nature was not one that impelled him to dwell for very long upon any painful or disturbing thought.

He gave his orders about the journey for the following day, then dressed and went out, remembering that he had two or three engagements for the evening. The season was nearly over, and many people had left London, but there seemed little

diminution in the number of guests who were struggling up and down the wide staircase of a house at which Hugo presented himself about twelve o'clock that night, and he missed very few familiar faces amongst the crowd as he nodded greetings to his numerous acquaintances.

"Ah, Luttrell," said a voice at his ear, "I was wondering if I should see you. I thought you might be off to Scotland already.'

"Who told you I was going to Scotland?" said Hugo.

The dark shadow had crossed his face again; if there was a man in England whom at that time he cordially disliked, it was this man—Angela's brother—Rupert Vivian. He did not know why, but he always had a presage of disaster when he saw that high-bred, impassive face beside him, or heard the modulation of Vivian's quiet, musical voice. Hugo was superstitious, and he firmly believed that Rupert Vivian's presence brought him ill luck.

"Angela wrote to me that Mrs. Luttrell was inviting you to Netherglen. I was going there myself, but I have been prevented. A relation of mine in Wales is dying, and has sent for me, so I may not be able to get to Scotland for some weeks."

"Sorry not to see you. I shall be gone by the time you reach Scotland, then," responded Hugo, amiably.

"Yes." Rupert looked down with a reflective air. "Come here, will you?" he said, drawing Hugo aside into a small curtained recess, with a seat just wide enough for two, which happened at that moment to be empty. "I have something to ask you; there is something that you can do for me if you will."

"Happy to do anything in my power," murmured Hugo. He did not like to be asked to help other people, but there was a want of assurance in Vivian's usually self-contained demeanour which roused his curiosity. "What is it?"

"Well, to begin with, you know the Herons and Miss Murray, do you not?"

"I know them by name. I have met Percival Heron sometimes."

"Do you know that they have returned rather unexpectedly from Italy and gone to Strathleckie, the house on the other side of the property—about six miles from Netherglen?"

"How's that?"

"I suppose that Miss Murray thinks she may as well take possession of her estate," replied Rupert, rather shortly. "May I ask whether you are going to call?"

"Oh, yes, I shall certainly call."

"Then, look here, Luttrell, I want you to do something for me," said Vivian, falling into a more friendly and confidential

strain than he usually employed with Hugo. "Will you mention—in an incidental sort of way—to Mrs. Heron the reason why I have not come to Scotland—the claim that my relation in Wales has on me, and all that sort of thing? It is hardly worth while writing about it, perhaps; still, if it came in your way, you might do me a service."

Hugo was so much relieved to find nothing more difficult required of him that he gave vent to a light laugh.

"Why don't you write?" he said.

"There's nothing to write about. I do not correspond with them," said Rupert, actually colouring a little beneath Hugo's long, satirical gaze. "But I fancy they may think me neglectful. I promised some time ago that I would run down; and I don't see how I can—until November, at the earliest. And, if you are there, you may as well mention the reason for my going to Wales, or, you see, it will look like a positive slight."

"I'm to say all this to Mrs. Heron, am I? And to no one beside?"

"That will be quite sufficient." There was a slight touch of hauteur in Vivian's tone. "And, if I may trouble you with something else——"

"No trouble at all. Another message?"

"Not exactly. If you would take care of this little packet for me I should be glad. I am afraid of its being crushed or lost in the post. It is for Miss Heron."

He produced a little parcel, carefully sealed and addressed. It looked like a small, square box. Hugo smiled as he took it in his hand.

"Perishable?" he asked, carelessly.

"Not exactly. The contents are fully a hundred years old already. It is something for Miss Heron's birthday. She is a great favourite of mine—a nice ittle girl."

"Quite a child, I suppose?"

"Oh, of course. One won't be able to send her presents by-and-bye," said Rupert, with rather an uneasy laugh. "What a pity it is that some children ever grow up! Well, thanks, Hugo; I shall be very much obliged to you. Are you going now?"

"Must be moving on, I suppose. I saw old Colquhoun the other day, and he began telling me about Miss Murray, and all the wonders she was doing for the Herons. Makes believe that the money is theirs, not her own, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"Odd idea. She must be a curiosity. They brought a tutor with them from Italy, I believe; some fellow they picked up in the streets."

"He has turned out a very satisfactory one," Rupert answered, coldly. "They say that he makes a capital tutor for the little boys. I think he is a favourite with all of them; he teaches Miss Heron Italian."

His voice had taken a curiously formal tone. It sounded as though he was displeased at something which had occurred to him.

Hugo thought of that tone and of the conversation many times before he left London next evening. He was rather an adept at the discovery of small mysteries; he liked to draw conclusions from a series of small events, and to ferret out other people's secrets. He thought that he was now upon the track of some design of Vivian's, and he became exceedingly curious about it. If it had been possible to open the box without disturbing the seals upon it, he would certainly have done so; but, this being out of the question, he contented himself with resolving to be present when it was opened, and to observe with care the effect produced by Vivian's message on the faces of Mrs. Heron, Miss Heron, and Miss Murray.

He reached Dunmuir (where the nearest station to his aunt's house was situated) at eleven o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Luttrell had sent the mail-phaeton for him. As Hugo took the reins and glanced at the shining harness and the lustrous coats of the beautiful bays, he could not help remembering the day when the mail-phaeton had last been sent to bring him from the station. Richard had then sat in the place that he now occupied, with Angela beside him; and Brian and Hugo laughed and talked in the back seat, and were as merry as they well could be. Nearly two years ago! What changes had been seen since then.

The bays were fidgetty and would not start at once. Hugo was just shouting a hasty direction to the groom at their heads when he happened to glance aside towards the station door were two or three persons were standing. The groom had cause to wonder what was the matter. Hugo gave the reins a tremendous jerk, which brought the horses nearly upon their haunches, and then let them go at such a pace that it seemed as if he had entirely lost control over them. But he was a very good whip, and soon mastered the fiery creatures, reducing their mad speed by degrees to a gentle trot, which enabled the groom to overtake them, panting and red in the face, indeed, as he swung himself up behind. The groom was inclined to think that Mr. Hugo had lost his nerve for a few moments; for "his face turned as white," honest John remarked afterwards, "as if he had seen a ghost."

"John,' said Hugo, after driving for a good two miles in silence, "who was that gentleman at the station door?"

"Gentleman, sir?"

"A young man—at least, he seemed young—in a great-coat."

"Oh!—I don't think that's a young gentleman, exactly; leastways he's got grey hair. That's the gentleman that teaches at Mr. Heron's, sir; Mr. Heron, the uncle to Miss Murray that has the property now. His name's Mr. Stretton, sir. I asked Mr. Heron's coachman."

"What made you ask?"

The groom hesitated and shuffled; but, upon being kept sharply to the point, avowed that it was because the gentleman "seen from behind" looked so much like Mr. Brian Luttrell. "Of course, his face is quite different from Mr. Brian's, sir," he said, hastily, noting a shadow upon Hugo's brow; "and he has grey hair and a beard, and all that; but his walk was a little like poor Mr. Brian's, sir, I thought."

Hugo was silent. He had not noticed the man's gait, but, in spite of the grey hair, the tanned complexion, the brown beard—which had lately been allowed to cover the lower part of Mr. Stretton's face, and had changed it very greatly—in spite of all these things he had noticed, and been startled by, the expression of a pair of grave, brown eyes—graver and sadder than Brian's eyes used to be, but full of the tenderness and the sweetness that Hugo had never seen in the face of any other man. Full, also, of recognition; there was the rub. A man who knows you cannot look at you in the same way as one who knows you not, and it was this look of knowledge which had unnerved Hugo, and make him doubt the evidence of his own senses.

He was still silent and absorbed when he arrived at Netherglen, and felt glad to hear that he was not to see his aunt until later in the day. Angela came to meet him at the door; she was pale, and her black dress made her look very slender and fragile, but she had the old, sweet smile and pleasant words of welcome for him, and could not understand why his face was so gloomy, and his eyes so obstinately averted from her own.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Hugo was admitted to Mrs. Luttrell's sitting-room. He had scarcely seen her since the death of her eldest son, and was manifestly startled and shocked to see her looking so much more aged and worn than she had been two years ago. She greeted him much after her usual fashion, however; she allowed him to touch her smooth, cold cheek with his lips, and take her stiff hand into his own, but she showed no trace of any softening emotion.

"Sit down, Hugo," she said. "I am sorry to have brought you away from your friends."

"Oh, I was glad to come," said Hugo, confusedly. "I was not with friends; I was in town. It was late for town, but I—I had business."

"This house is no longer a cheerful one," continued Mrs. Luttrell, in a cold, monotonous voice. "There are no attractions for young men now. It has been a house of mourning. I could not expect you to visit me."

"Indeed, Aunt Margaret, I would have come if I had known that you wanted me," said Hugo, wondering whether his tardiness would entail the loss of Mrs. Luttrell's money.

He recovered his self-possession and his fluency at this thought; if danger were near, it behoved him to be on the alert.

"I have wanted you," said Mrs. Luttrell. "But I could wait. I knew that you would come in time. Now, listen to what I have to say."

Hugo held his breath. What could she say that needed all this preamble?

"Hugo Luttrell," his aunt began, very deliberately, "you are a poor man and an extravagant one."

Hugo smiled, and bowed his head.

"But you are only extravagant. You are not vicious. You have never done a dishonourable thing—one for which you need blush or fear to meet the eye of an honest man? Answer me that, Hugo. I may know what you will say, but I want to hear it from your own lips."

Hugo did not flinch. His face assumed the boyish innocence of expression which had often stood him in good stead. His great, dark eyes looked boldly into hers.

"That is all true, Aunt Margaret. I may have done foolish things, but nothing worse. I have been extravagant, as you say, but I have not been dishonourable."

He could not have dared to say so much if Richard or Brian had been alive to contradict him; but they were safely out of the way and he could say what he chose.

"Then I can trust you, Hugo."

"I will try to be worthy of your trust, Aunt Margaret."

He bent down to kiss her hand in his graceful, foreign fashion; but she drew it somewhat hastily away.

"No. None of your Sicilian ways for me, Hugo. That foreign drop in your blood is just what I hate. But you're the only Luttrell left; and I hope I know my duty. I want to have a talk with you about the house, and the property, and so on."

"I shall be glad if I can do anything to help you," said Hugo,

smoothly. His cheek was beginning to flush; he wished that his aunt would come to the point. Suspense was very trying! But Mrs. Luttrell seemed to be in no hurry.

"You know, perhaps," she said, "that I am a tolerably rich woman still. The land, the farms, and the moors, and all that part of the property passed to Miss Murray upon my sons' deaths; but this house and the grounds (though not the loch nor the woods) are still mine, and I have a fair income with which to keep them up. I should like to know that one of my husband's name was to come after me. I should like to know that there would be Luttrells of Netherglen for many years to come."

She paused a few minutes, but Hugo made no reply.

"I have a proposition to make to you," she went on presently. "I don't make it without conditions. You shall hear what they are by-and-bye. I should like to make you my heir. I can leave my money and my house to anyone I choose. I have about fifteen-hundred a-year, and then there's the house and the garden. Should you think it worth having?"

"I think," said Hugo, with a wily avoidance of any direct answer, "that it is very painful to hear you talk of leaving your property to anyone."

"That is mere sentimental nonsense," replied his aunt, with a perceptible increase in the coldness of her manner. "The question is, will you agree to the conditions on which I leave my money to you?"

"I will do anything in my power," murmured Hugo.

"I want you, then, to arrange to spend at least half the year with me here. You can leave the army; I do not think that it is a profession that suits you. Live here, and fill the place of a son to me. I have no sons left. Be as like one of them as it is in your power to be."

In spite of himself Hugo's face fell. Leave the army, leave England, bury himself for half the year with an old woman in a secluded spot, which, although beautiful in summer and autumn, was unspeakably dreary in winter? She had not required so much of Richard or Brian; why should she ask for such a sacrifice from him?

Mrs. Luttrell watched his face, and read pretty clearly the meaning of the various expressions which chased each other across it.

"It seems a hard thing to you at first, no doubt," she said, composedly. "But you would find interests and amusements in course of time. You would have six months of the year in which to go abroad, or to divert yourself in London. You should have

a sufficient income. And my other condition is that you marry as soon as you can find a suitable wife."

"Marry!" said Hugo, in dismay. "I never thought of marriage!"

"You will think of it some time, I presume. An early marriage is good for young men. I should like to see you married, and have your children growing up about me."

"Perhaps you have thought of a suitable lady?" said Hugo, with a half-sneer. The prospect that had seemed so desirable at first was now very much lowered in his estimation, and he did not disguise the sullen anger that he felt. But he hardly expected Mrs. Luttrell's answer.

"Yes, I have."

"Indeed! Who is it?"

"Miss Murray. Elizabeth Murray, to whom your cousins' estates have gone."

"What sort of a person is she?"

"Young, beautiful, rich. A little older than yourself, but not much. You would make a fine couple, Hugo. She came to see me the other day, and you would have thought she was a princess."

"I should like to see her," said Hugo, thoughtfully.

"Well, you must just go and call. And then you can think the matter over and let me know. I'm in no hurry for a decision."

"You are very good, Aunt Margaret."

"No. I am only endeavouring to be just. I should like to see you prosperous and happy. And, while you are here, you will oblige me by considering yourself the master of the house, Hugo. Give your own orders, and invite your own friends."

Hugo murmured some slight objection.

"It will not affect my comfort in the least. I kept some of the horses, and one or two vehicles that I thought you would like. Use them all. You will not expect to see very much of me; I seldom come downstairs, so the house will be free for you and your friends. When you have decided what you mean to do, let me know."

Hugo thanked her and retired. He did not see her again until the following evening, when she met him with a question.

"Have you seen Miss Murray yet?"

"Yes," said Hugo, lowering his eyes.

"And have you come to any decision?"

"Yes."

"I should like to know what it is," said Mrs. Luttrell.

Her hands, which were crossed before her on her knee, trembled a little as she said the words,

Hugo hesitated for a moment.

"I have made my decision," he said at last, in a firm voice, "and it is one that I know I shall never have cause to repent. Aunt Margaret, I accept your kind—your generous—offer, and I will be to you as a son."

He had prepared his little speech so carefully that it scarcely sounded artificial when it issued from those curved, beautiful lips, and was emphasised by the liquid softness of his Southern eyes.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LOST LETTER.

Hugo's visit to the Herons was paid rather late in the afternoon, and he, therefore, had the full benefit of the whole family party, as each member of it dropped in to tea. Mrs. Heron's old habits still re-asserted themselves, in spite of the slight check imposed on her by the remembrance that the house belonged to Elizabeth, that the many new luxuries and comforts, including freedom from debt, had come from Elizabeth's purse, and that Elizabeth, although she chose to abdicate her power, was really the sovereign of Strathleckie. But Elizabeth arrogated so little to herself, and was so wonderfully content to be second in the house, that Mrs. Heron was apt to forget the facts of the case, and to act as if she were mistress as much as she had ever been in the untidy dwelling in Gower-street.

As regarded the matter of tidiness, Elizabeth had made reforms. There were now many more servants than there had been in Gower-street, and the drawing-room could not present quite the same look of chaos as had formerly prevailed there. But Elizabeth knew the ways of the household too well to expect that Mr. Heron's paint-brushes, Mrs. Heron's novels, and the children's toys would not be found in every quarter of the house; it was as much as she could do to select rooms that were intended to fill the purposes of studio, boudoir, and nursery; she could not make her relations confine themselves and their occupations to their respective apartments.

She had had a great struggle with her uncle before the present state of affairs came about. He had roused himself sufficiently to protest against making use of her money and not giving her, as he said, her proper position; but Elizabeth's determined will overcame all his objections. "I never wanted this money," she said to him; "I think it a burden. The only way in which I can enjoy it is by making life a little easier to other people. And you have the first claim—you and my cousins; because you

took me in and were good to me when I was a little, friendless orphan of twelve years old. So, now that I have the chance, you must come and stay with me in my house and keep me from feeling lonely, and then I shall be able to think that my wealth is doing good to somebody beside myself. You make me feel as if I were a stranger, and not one of yourselves, when you object to my doing things for you. Would you mind taking gifts from Kitty? And am I so much less dear to you than Kitty? You used to tell me that I was like a daughter to you. Let me be your daughter still."

Mr. Heron found it difficult to make protests in the face of these arguments; and Mrs. Heron slid gracefully into the arrangement without any protest at all. Kitty's objections were easily overcome; and the children thought it perfectly natural that their cousin should share her good gifts with them, in the same way that, when she was younger, she divided with them the toys and sweeties that kind friends bestowed upon her.

Therefore, when Hugo called at Strathleckie, he was struck with the fact that it was Mrs. Heron, and not Elizabeth, who acted as his hostess. It needed all his knowledge of the circumstances and history of the family to convince himself that the house did not belong to Alfred Heron, the artist, and that the stately girl in a plain, black dress, who poured out the tea, was the real mistress of the house. She acted very much as though she were a dependent, or at most an elder daughter, in the same position as little Kitty, who assumed no airs of authority over anybody or anything.

Hugo admired Elizabeth, as he admired beautiful women everywhere; but he was not interested in her. Mentally he called her fool for not adopting her right station and spending her money in her own way. She was too grave for him. He was more at his ease with Kitty.

Rupert Vivian's message—if it could be called a message—was given lightly and carelessly enough, but Hugo had the satisfaction of seeing the colour flash all over Miss Heron's little *mignonne* face as he listened to Mrs. Heron's languid reply.

"Dear me! and is that old relative in Wales really dying? Mr. Vivian has always made periodical excursions into Wales ever since I knew him. Well, I wondered why he did not write to say that he was coming. It was an understood thing that he should stay with us as soon as we returned from Italy, and I was surprised to hear nothing from him. Were not you, Kitty?"

"No, I was not at all surprised," said Kitty, rather sharply.

"I had a commission to execute for my friend," said Hugo,

turning a little towards her. "Mr. Vivian asked me to take charge of a parcel, and to place it in your own hands; he was afraid that it would be broken if it went by post. He told me that it was a little birthday remembrance.

He laid the parcel on a table beside the girl. He noticed that her colour varied, but that she did not speak. Mrs. Heron's voice filled the pause.

"How kind of you to bring it, Mr. Luttrell! Mr. Vivian always remembers our birthdays; especially Kitty's. Does he not, Kitty?"

"Not mine especially," said Kitty, frowning. She looked at the box as if she did not care to open it.

"Do let us see what it is," pursued Mrs. Heron. "Mr. Vivian has such exquisite taste! Shall we open the box, Kitty?"

"If you like," returned Kitty. "Here is a pair of scissors."

"Oh, we could not think of opening your box for you; open it yourself, dear. Make haste; we are all quite curious, are we not, Mr. Luttrell?"

Mr. Luttrell smiled a little, and toyed with his tea-spoon; his eyes were fixed questioningly on Kitty's mutinous face, with its down-dropped, curling lashes and pouting rose-leaf lips. He felt more curiosity respecting the contents of that little box than he cared to show.

She opened it at last, slowly and reluctantly, as it seemed to him, and took out of a nest of pink cotton-wool a string of filagree silver beads. They were very delicately worked, and there was some ground for Vivian's fear that they might get injured in the post, for their beauty was very great. Mrs. Heron went into ecstasies over the gift. It was accompanied merely by a card, on which a few words were written: "For Miss Heron's birthday, with compliments and good wishes from Rupert Vivian." Kitty read the inscription; her lip curled, but she still kept silence. Hugo thought that her eye rested with some complacency upon the silver beads; but she did not express a tithe of the pleasure and surprise which flowed so readily from Mrs. Heron's fluent tongue.

"Don't you like them, Kitty?" asked an inconvenient younger brother who had entered the room.

"They are very pretty," said Kitty.

"Not so pretty as the ornament he sent you last year," said Harry. "But it's very jolly of him to send such nice things every birthday, ain't it?"

"Yes, he is very kind," Kitty answered, with a shy sort of stiffness, which seemed to show that she could well dispense with his kindness. Hugo laughed to himself, and pictured Vivian's

discomfiture if he had seen the reception of his present. He changed the subject.

"Have you been long in Scotland, Miss Murray?"

"For a fortnight only. We came rather suddenly, hearing that the tenant had left this house. We expected him to stay for some time longer."

"It is fortunate for us that Strathleckie happened to fall vacant," said Hugo, gravely.

"Do you know, Betty," said one of the boys at that moment, "that Mr. Stretton says he has been in Scotland before, and knows this part of the country very well?"

"Yes, he told me so."

"Mr. Stretton is our tutor," said Harry, kindly explaining his remark to the visitor. "He only came yesterday morning. He had a holiday when we came here; and so had we."

"I presume that you like holidays," said Hugo, caressing the silky moustache that was just covering his upper lip, and smiling at the child, with a notion that he was making himself pleasant to the ladies of the party by doing so.

"I liked holidays before Mr. Stretton came to us," said Harry. "But I don't mind lessons half so much now. He teaches in such a jolly sort of way."

"Mr. Stretton is a favourite," remarked Hugo, looking at the mother.

"Such a clever man!" sighed Mrs. Heron. "So kind to the children! We met him in Italy."

"I think I saw him at the station yesterday. He has grey hair?"

"Yes, but he's quite young," interposed Harry, indignantly. "He isn't thirty; I asked him. He had a brain fever, and it turned his hair grey; he told me so."

"It has a very striking effect," said Mrs. Heron, languidly. "He has a fine face—my husband says a beautiful face—and framed in that grey hair —— I wish you could see him, Mr. Luttrell, but he is so shy that it seems impossible to drag him out of his own particular den."

"So very shy, is he?" thought Hugo to himself. "I wonder where I have seen him. I am sure I have seen him before, and I am sure that he knew me. Well, I must wait. I suppose I shall meet him again in the course of time."

He took his leave, remembering that he had already outstayed the conventional limits of a call; and he was pleased when Mrs. Heron showed some warmth of interest in his future movements, and expressed a wish to see him again very soon. Her words showed either ignorance or languid neglect of the usages

of society, but they did not offend him. He wanted to come again. He wanted to see more of Kitty.

He had ridden from Strathleckie to Netherglen, and he paced his horse slowly along the solitary road which he had to traverse on his way homewards. The beautiful autumn tints and the golden haze that filled the air had no attractions for him. But it was pleasant to him to be away from Mrs. Luttrell; and he wanted a little space of time in which to meditate upon his future course of action. He had seen the woman whom his aunt wished him to marry. Well, she was handsome enough; she was rich; she would look well at the head of his table, ruling over his household, managing his affairs and her own. But he would rather that it had been Kitty.

At this point he brought his horse to a sudden standstill. Before him, leaning over a gate with his back to the road, he saw a man whom he recognised at once. It was Mr. Stretton, the tutor. He had taken off his hat, and his grey hair looked very remarkable upon his youthful figure. Hugo walked his horse slowly forward, but the beat of the animal's feet on the hard road aroused the tutor from his reverie. He glanced round, saw Hugo approaching, and then, without haste, but without hesitation, quietly opened the gate, and made his way into the field.

Hugo stopped again, and watched him as he crossed the field. He was very curious concerning this stranger. He felt as if he ought to recognise him, and he could not imagine why.

Mr. Stretton was almost out of sight, and Hugo was just turning away, when his eye fell upon a piece of white paper on the ground beside the gate. It looked like a letter. Had the tutor dropped it as he loitered in the road? Hugo was off his horse instantly, and had the paper in his hand. It was a letter written on thin, foreign paper, in a small, neat, foreign hand; it was addressed to Mr. John Stretton, and it was written in Italian.

To Hugo, Italian was as familiar as English, and a momentary glance showed him that this letter contained information that might be valuable to him. He could not read it on the road; the owner of the letter might discover his loss and turn back at any moment to look for it. He put it carefully into his pocket, mounted his horse again, and made the best of his way to Netherglen.

He was so late in arriving that he had little time to devote to the letter before dinner. But when Mrs. Luttrell had kissed him and said good-night, when he, with filial courtesy, had conducted her to the door of her bed-room, and taken his final leave of her and of Angela on the landing, then he made his way to the library, rang for more lights, more coal, spirits and hot water, and pre-

pared to devote a little time to the deciphering of the letter which Mr. John Stretton had been careless enough to lose.

He was not fond of the library. It was next to the room in which they had laid Richard Luttrell when they brought him home after the "accident." It looked out on the same stretch of garden; the rose trees that had tapped mournfully at that other window, when Hugo was compelled by Brian to pay a last visit to the room where the dead man lay, had sent out long shoots that reached the panes of the library window, too. When there was any breeze, those branches would go on tap, tapping against the glass like the sound of a human hand. Hugo hated the noise of that ghostly tapping: he hated the room itself, and the long, dark corridor upon which it opened, but it was the most convenient place in the house for his purpose, and he therefore made use of it.

"San Stefano!" he murmured to himself, as he looked at the name of the place from which the letter had been dated. "Why, I have heard my uncle mention San Stefano as the place where Brian was born. They lived there for some months. My aunt had an illness there, which nobody ever liked to talk about. Hum! What connection has Mr. John Stretton with San Stefano, I wonder? Let me see."

He spread the letter carefully out before him, turned up the lamp, and began to read. As he read, his face turned somewhat pale; he read certain passages twice, and then remained for a time in the same position, with his elbows upon the table and his face supported between his hands. He found matter for thought in that letter.

It ran as follows:—

"My Dear Mr. Stretton,—I will continue to address you by this name as you desire me to do, although I am at a loss to understand your motive in assuming it. You will excuse my making this remark; the confidence that you have hitherto reposed in me leads me to utter a criticism which might otherwise be deemed an impertinence. But it seems to me a pity that you either did not retain your old name and the advantages that this name placed in your way, or that you did not take up the appellation which, as I fear I must repeat, is the only one to which you have any legal right. If your name is not Luttrell, it is Vasari. If you object to retaining the name of Luttrell, why not adopt Vasari? Why complicate matters by taking a name (like that of Stretton) which has no meaning, no importance, no distinction? All unnecessary concealment of truth is foolish; and this is an unnecessary concealment.

"Secondly, may I ask why you propose to accompany your

English friends to a place so near your old home? If you wish it to be thought that you are dead, why, in Heaven's name, do you go to a spot which is not ten miles from the house where you were brought up? True, your appearance is altered; your hair is grey and your beard has grown. But your voice: have you thought how easily your voice may betray you? And I have known cases where the eyes alone have revealed a person's identity. If you wish to keep your secret, let me entreat you not to go to Strathleckie. If you wish to undo all that you have succeeded in doing, if you wish to deprive the lady who has inherited the Strathleckie property of her inheritance, then, indeed, you will go to Scotland, but in so doing you show a want of judgment and resolution which I cannot understand.

"You were at the monastery with us after your illness for many months. We learned to know you well and to regard you with affection. We were sorry when you grew restless and wandered away from us to seek fresh work amongst English people—English and Protestant—for the sake of old associations and habit. But we did not think—or at least I did not think—that you were so illogical and so weak as your present conduct drives me to consider you.

"There is only one explanation possible. You risk discovery, you follow these people to Scotland because one of the ladies of the family has given you, or you hope that she will give you, some special marks of favour. In plain words, you are in love. I have partially gathered that from your letters. Perhaps she also is in love with you. There is a Miss Heron, who is said to be beautiful; there is also Miss Murray. Is it on account of either of these ladies that you have returned to Scotland?

"I speak very frankly, because I conceive that I have a certain claim upon your confidence. I do not merely allude to the kindness shown to you by the Brothers of San Stefano, which probably saved your life. I claim your regard because I know that you were born in this village, baptised by one of ourselves, that you are of Italian parentage, and that you have never had any right to the name that you have borne for four-and-twenty years. This was suspicion when I saw you last; it is certainty now. We have found the woman Vincenza, who is your mother. She has told us her story, and it is one which even your English courts of law will find it difficult to disprove. She acknowledges that she changed the two children; that, when one of her twins died, she thought that she could benefit the other by putting it in the place of the English child. Her own baby, Bernardino, was brought up by the Luttrell family and called Brian Luttrell. That was yourself.

"How about the English boy, the real heir to the property? I told you about him when you were with us; I offered to let you see him: I wanted you to know him. You declined; I think you were wrong. You did see him many a time; you were friendly with him, although you did not know the connection that existed between you. I believe that you will remember him when I tell you that he was known in the monastery as Brother Dino. Dino Vasari was the name by which he had been known; but I think that you never learnt his surname. He had a romantic affection for you, and was grieved when you refused to meet the man who had so curious a claim upon your notice. I sent him away from the monastery in a few days, as you will perhaps remember; I knew that if he saw much of you, not even my authority, my influence, would induce him to keep the secret of his birth—from you. You are rivals, certainly; you might be enemies; and, just because that cause of rivalry and enmity subsists, Dino Vasari loves you with his whole soul. If you stood in your old position, even I could not persuade him to dispossess you; but you have voluntarily given it up. Your property has gone to your cousin, and Dino has now no scruple about claiming his rights. Now that Vincenza Vasari's evidence has been obtained, it is thought well that he should make the story public, and try to get his position acknowledged. Therefore he is starting for England, where he will arrive on the eighteenth of the month. He has his orders, and he will obey them. It is perhaps well that you should know what they are. He is to proceed at once to Scotland, and obtain interviews as soon as possible with Mr. Colquhoun and Mrs. Luttrell. He will submit his claims to them, and ascertain the line that they will take. After that, he will put the law in motion, and take steps towards dispossessing Miss Murray.

"I write all this to you at Dino's own request. I grieve to say that he is occasionally headstrong to a degree which gives us pain and anxiety. He refused to take any steps in the matter until I had communicated with you, because he says that if you intend to make yourself known by your former name, and take back the property which accrued to you upon Mr Richard Luttrell's death, he will not stand in your way. I have pointed out to him, as I now point out to you, that this line of action would be dishonest, and practically impossible, because, in his interests, we should then take the matter up and make the facts public, but he insists upon my mentioning the proposal. I mention it in full confidence that your generosity and sense of honour will alike prevent you from putting obstacles in the way

of my pupil's recognition by his mother and succession to his inheritance.

"If you wish that Dino (as for the sake of convenience I will still call him) should be restored to his rights, and if you desire to show that you have no ill-feeling towards him on account of this proposed endeavour to recover what is really his own, he begs you to meet him on his arrival in London on the 18th of August. He will be in lodgings kept by a good Catholic friend of ours at No. 14, Tarragon-street, Russell-square, and you will inquire for him by the name of Mr. Vasari, as he will not assume the name of Brian Luttrell until he has seen you. He will, of course, be in secular dress.

"I have now made you master of all necessary facts. If I have done so under protest, it is no concern of yours. I earnestly recommend you to give up your residence in Scotland, and to return, at any rate until this matter is settled, to San Stefano. I need hardly say that Brian Luttrell will never let you know the necessity of such drudgery as that in which you have lately been engaged.

"With earnest wishes for your welfare, and above all for your speedy return to the bosom of the true Catholic Church in which you were baptised, and of which I hope to see you one day account yourself a faithful child, I remain, my dear son,

"Your faithful friend and father,

"CRISTOFORO DONALDI,

"Prior of the Monastery of San Stefano."

CHAPTER XX.

"MISCHIEF, THOU ART AFOOT."

HUGO'S meditations were long and deep. More than an hour elapsed before he roused himself from the thoughtful attitude which he had assumed at the close of his first perusal of the letter. When he lifted his face from his hands, his lips were white, although they were twisted into the semblance of a smile.

"So that is why I fancied I knew his face," he said, half aloud. "Who would have thought it? Brian alive, after all! What a fool he must be! What an unmitigated, egregious fool!"

He poured out some brandy for himself with rather a shaky hand, and drank it off without water. He shivered a little, and drew closer to the fire. "It's a very cold night," he muttered, holding his hands out to the leaping flame, and resting his forehead upon the marble mantelpiece. "It's a cold night, and — it all, are my wits going? I can't think clearly; I can hardly see out of my eyes. It's the shock; that's what it is. The

shock? Yes, Dio mio, and it is a shock, in all conscience! Whoever would have believed that Brian could possibly be alive all this time! Poor devil! I suppose that little 'accident' to Richard preyed upon his mind. He must be mad to have given up his property from a scruple of that sort. I never should have thought that a man could be such a fool. It's an awful complication."

He threw himself into an arm-chair, and leaned back with his dark, delicately-beautiful face slanted reflectively towards the ceiling. He was too much disturbed in mind to afford himself the solace of a cigar.

"This old fellow—the Prior—seems to know the family affairs very intimately," he went on thinking. "This is another extraordinary occurrence. Brian alive is nothing to the fact that Brian is the son of some Italian woman—a peasant-woman probably. Did Aunt Margaret suspect it? She always hated Brian; every one could see that. When she said once, 'He is not my son,' did she mean the words literally? Quite possible."

"And the real Brian Luttrell is now to appear on the scene! What is his name? Dino—Bernardino—Vasari Of course, there was little use in his coming forward as long as Richard Luttrell was alive. Now that he is gone and Brian is heir to the property, this young fellow, whom the priests have got hold of, becomes important. No doubt this is what they have hoped for all along. He will have the property and he is a devout son of the Church, and will employ it to Catholic ends. I know the jargon—I heard enough of it in Sicily. They have the proofs, no doubt—they could easily manufacture them if they were wanting; and they will oust Elizabeth Murray and set their pet pupil in her place, and manage the land and the money and everything else for him. And what will Mrs. Luttrell say?"

He paused, and changed his position uneasily. His brows contracted; his eye grew restless as he continued to reflect.

"It's my belief," he said at last, "that Mrs. Luttrell will be enchanted. And then what will become of me?"

He rose from his chair and began to pace up and down the room. "What will become of me?" he repeated. "What will become of the fifteen-hundred a-year, and the house and grounds, and all the rest of the good things that she promised to give me? They will go, no doubt, to the son and heir. Did she ever propose to give me anything while Richard and Brian had to be provided for? Not she! She notices me now only because she thinks that I am the only Luttrell in existence. When she knows that there is a son of her's still living, I shall go to the wall. I shall be ruined. There will be no Netherglen for me, no marriage

with an heiress, no love-making with pretty little Kitty. I shall have to disappear from the scene. I cannot hold my ground against a son—a son of the house! Curses on him! Why isn't he dead?"

Hugo bestowed a few choice Sicilian epithets of a maledictory character upon Dino Vasari and Brian Luttrell both; then he returned to the table and studied the latter pages of Father Cristoforo's letter.

"Meet him in London. I should like to meet Dino Vasari, too. I wonder whether Brian had read this letter when he dropped it. These instructions come at the very end. If he has not read these sentences, I might find a way of outwitting them all yet. I think I could prevent Dino Vasari from ever setting foot in Scotland. How can I find out?"

"And what an extraordinary thing for Brian to do—to take a tutorship in the very family where Elizabeth Murray is living. What has he done it for? Is he in love with one of those girls? Or does he hope to retrieve his mistake by persuading Elizabeth Murray to marry him? A very round-about way of getting back his fortune, unless he means to induce Dino Vasari to hold his tongue. If Dino Vasari were out of the way, and Brian felt his title to the estate rather shaky, of course, it would be very clever of him to make love to Elizabeth. But he's too great a fool for that. What was his motive, I wonder? Is it possible that he did not know who she was?"

But he rejected this suggestion as an entirely incredible one.

After a little further thought, another idea occurred to him. Father Cristoforo's letter consisted of three closely-written sheets of paper. He separated the first sheet from the others; the last words on the sheet ran as follows:—

"Is it on account of either of these ladies that you have returned to England?"

This sheet he folded and enclosed in an envelope, which he carefully sealed and addressed to John Stretton, Esquire. He placed the other sheets in his own pocket-book, and then went peacefully to bed. He could do nothing more, he told himself, and, although his excitable disposition prevented his sleeping until dawn grew red in the eastern sky, he would not waste his powers unnecessarily by sitting up to brood over the resolution that he had taken.

Before ten o'clock next morning he was riding to Strathleckie. On reaching the house he asked at once if he could see Mr. Stretton. The maid-servant who answered the door looked surprised, hesitated a moment, and then asked him to walk in. He followed her, and was not surprised to find that she was conduct-

ing him straight to the school-room, which was on the ground-floor. He had thought that she looked stupid; now he was sure of it. But it was a stupidity so much to his advantage that he mentally vowed to reward it by the gift of half-a-crown when he had the opportunity.

The boys were at their lessons; their tutor sat at the head of the table, with his back towards the light. When he saw Hugo enter, he calmly took a pair of blue spectacles from the table and fixed them upon his nose. Hugo admired the coolness of the action. The blue spectacles were even a better disguise than the grey hair and the beard; if Mr. Stretton had worn them when he was standing at the railway station door, Hugo would never have been haunted by that look of recognition in his eyes.

"Mary has made a mistake," said Mr. Stretton to one of the boys, in a curiously-muffled voice. "Take this gentleman up to the drawing-room, Harry."

"There is no mistake," said Hugo, suavely. "I called to see Mr. Stretton on business; it will not take me a moment to explain. Mr. Stretton, may I ask whether you have lost any paper—a letter, I think—during the last few days?"

"Yes. I lost a letter yesterday afternoon."

"On the high road, I think. Then I was not mistaken in supposing that a paper that the wind blew to my feet this morning, as I was strolling down the road, belonged to yourself. Will you kindly open this envelope and tell me whether the paper contained in it is yours?"

Mr. Stretton took the envelope and opened it without a word. He looked at the sheet, saw that one only was there, and then replied.

"I am much obliged to you for your kindness. Yes, this is part of the letter that I lost."

"Only part? Indeed, I am sorry for that," said Hugo, with every appearance of genuine interest. "I was first attracted towards it because it looked like a foreign letter, and I saw that it was written in Italian. On taking it up, I observed that it was addressed to a Mr. Stretton, and I could think of no other Mr. Stretton in the neighbourhood but yourself."

"I am much obliged to you," Mr. Stretton repeated.

"I hope you will find the rest of the letter," said Hugo, with rather a mocking look in his beautiful eyes. "It is awkward sometimes to drop one's correspondence. I need hardly say that it was safe in my hands——"

"I am sure of that," said Mr. Stretton, mechanically.

"But others might have found it—and read it. I hope it was not an important letter."

"I hope not," Mr. Stretton answered, recovering himself a little; "but the fact is that I had read only the first page or two when I was interrupted, and I must have dropped it instead of putting it into my pocket."

"That was unfortunate," said Hugo. "I hope it contained no very important communication. Good morning, Mr. Stretton; good morning to you," he added, with a smile for the children. "I must not interrupt you any longer."

He withdrew, with a feeling of contemptuous wonder at the carelessness of a man who could lose a letter that he had never read. It was not the kind of carelessness that he practised.

He did not leave the house without encountering Mrs. Heron and Kitty. He was easily persuaded to stay for a little time. It cost him no effort to make himself agreeable. He was like one of those sleek-coated animals of the panther tribe, sufficiently tamed or tameable to like caresses; and very few people recognised the latent ferocity that lay beneath the velvet softness of those dreamy eyes. He could bask in the sunshine like a cat; but he was only half-tamed after all.

Elizabeth distrusted him; Kitty thought her unjust, and therefore acted as though she liked him better than she really did. She was a child still in her love of mischief, and she soon found a sort of pleasure in alternately vexing and pleasing her new admirer. But she was not in earnest. What did it matter to her if Hugo Luttrell's eyes glowed when she spoke a kind word to him, or his brow grew black as thunder if she neglected him for someone else? It never occurred to her to question whether it was wise to trifle with passions which might be of truly Southern vehemence and intensity.

Hugo did not leave the house without making—or thinking that he had made—a discovery. Mr. Stretton did not appear at luncheon, but Hugo caught sight of him afterwards in the garden—with Elizabeth. To Hugo's mind, the very attitude assumed by the tutor in speaking to Miss Murray was a revelation. He was as sure as he was of his own existence that Mr. Stretton was "in love." Whether the affection was returned by Miss Murray or not he could not feel so sure.

He made his way, after his visit to the Herons, to Mr. Colquhoun's office, and was fortunate in finding that gentleman at home.

"Well, Hugo, and how are you?" asked the lawyer, who did not regard Mrs. Luttrell's nephew with any particular degree of favour. "What brings you to this part of the world again?"

"My aunt's invitation," said Hugo.

"Ah, yes; your aunt has a hankering after anybody of the

name of Luttrell, at present. It won't last. Don't trust to it, Hugo."

"I cannot say that I know what you mean, Mr. Colquhoun. I suppose I am at liberty to accept my aunt's repeated and pressing invitation? I came here to ask you a question. I will not trespass on your time longer than I can help."

"Ask away, lad," said the old lawyer, not much impressed by Hugo's stateliness of demeanour. "Ask away. You'll get no lies, at any rate. And what is it you're wanting now?"

"Have you any reason to suppose that my cousin Brian is not dead?"

"No," said Mr. Colquhoun, shortly. "I haven't. I wish I had. Have you?"

Without replying to this question, Hugo asked another.

"You have no reason to think that there is any other man who would call himself by that name?"

"No," said Mr. Colquhoun again, "I haven't. And I don't wish I had. But have you?"

"Yes," said Hugo.

"Come, come, come," said the lawyer, restlessly; "you are joking, young man. Don't carry a joke too far. What do you mean?"

Again Hugo replied by a question. "Did you ever hear of a place called San Stefano?" he said, gently.

Old Mr. Colquhoun bounded in his seat. "Good God!" he said, although he was not a man given to the use of such ejaculations. And then he stared fixedly at Hugo.

"I can't think how it has been kept quiet so long," said Hugo, tentatively. He was feeling his way. But this remark roused Mr. Colquhoun's ire.

"Kept quiet? There was nothing to be kept quiet. Nothing except Mrs. Luttrell's own delusion on the subject; nobody wanted it to be known that she was as mad as a March hare on the subject. The nurse was as honest as the day. I saw her and questioned her myself."

"But my aunt never believed——"

"She never believed Brian to be her son. So much I may tell you without any breach of confidence, now that they are both in their graves, poor lads!" And then Mr. Colquhoun launched out upon the story of Mrs. Luttrell's illness and (so-called) delusion, to all of which Hugo listened with serious attention. But at the close of the narrative, the lawyer remembered Hugo's opening question. "And how did you come to know anything about it?" he said.

Hugo's answer was ready. "I met a queer sort of man in

the town this morning who was making inquiries that set me on the alert. I got hold of him—walked along the road with him for some distance—and heard a long story. He was a priest, I think—sent from San Stefano to investigate. I got a good deal out of him.

"Eh?" said Mr. Colquhoun, slowly. "And where might he be staying, yon priest?"

"Didn't ask," replied Hugo. "I told him to come to you for information. So you can look out. There's something in the wind, I'm sure. I thought you might have heard of it. Thank you for your readiness to enlighten me, Mr. Colquhoun. I've learnt a good deal to-day. Good morning."

"Now what did he mean by that?" said the lawyer, when he was left alone. "It's hard to tell when he's telling the truth and when he's lying just for the pleasure of it, so to speak. As for his priest—I'm not so sure that I believe in his priest. I'll send down to the hotel and inquire."

He sent to every hotel in the place, and from every hotel he received the same answer. They had no foreign visitor, and had had none for the last three weeks. There was apparently not a priest in the place. "It'll just be one of Master Hugo's lies," said Mr. Colquhoun, grimly. "There's a rod in pickle for that young man one of these days, and I should like well to have the applying of it to his shoulders. He's an awful scamp, is Hugo."

There was a triumphant smile upon Hugo's face as he rode away from the lawyer's office. Twice in that day had his generalship been successful, and his success disposed him to think rather meanly of his fellow-creatures' intellects. It was surely very easy, and decidedly pleasant, to outwit one's neighbours! He had made both Brian and Mr. Colquhoun give him information which they would have certainly withheld had they known the object for which it had been asked. He was proud of his own dexterity.

On his arrival at Netherglen he found that Mrs. Luttrell and Angela had gone for a drive. He was glad of it. He wanted a little time to himself in Brian's old room. He had already noticed that an old-fashioned davenport which stood in this room had never been emptied of its contents, and in this davenport he found two or three papers which were of service to him. He took them away to his bed-room, where he practised a certain kind of handwriting for two or three hours with tolerable success. He tried it again after dinner, when everybody was in bed, and he tried it again next day. It was rather a difficult hand to imitate well, but he was not easily discouraged.

"I am afraid, dear aunt, that I must run up to town for a day

or two," he said to Mrs. Luttrell that evening, with engaging frankness. "I have business to transact. But I will be back in three or four days at most, if you will permit me."

"Do as you please, Hugo," said Mrs. Luttrell, in her stoniest manner. "I have no wish to impose any kind of trammels upon you."

"Dear Aunt Margaret, the only trammels that you impose are those of love!" said Hugo, in his silkiest undertone.

Angela looked up. For the moment she was puzzled. To her, Hugo's speech sounded insincere. But the glance of the eye that she encountered was so caressing, the curves of his mouth were so sweetly infantine, that she accused herself of harsh judgment, and remembered Hugo's foreign blood and Continental training, which had given him the habit, she supposed, of saying "pretty things." She could not doubt his sincerity when she looked at the peach-like bloom of that oval face, the impenetrable softness of those velvet eyes. Hugo's physical beauty always stood him in good stead.

"You are an affectionate, warm-hearted boy, I believe, Hugo," said Mrs. Luttrell. Then, after a short pause, she added, with no visible link of connection, "I have written instructions to Colquhoun. I expect him here to-morrow."

Hugo looked innocent and attentive, but made no comment. His aunt kissed him with more warmth than usual when she said good-night. She had seldom kissed her sons after they reached manhood; but she caressed Hugo very frequently. She was softer in her manner with him than she had been even with Richard.

"Take care of yourself in London," she said to him. "Do you want any money?"

"No, thank you, Aunt Margaret. I shall be back in three days if I start to-morrow—at least, I think so. I'll telegraph if I am detained."

"Yes, do so. To-morrow is the seventeenth. You will be back by the twentieth?"

"If my business is done," said Hugo. And then he went back to his little experiments in caligraphy.

It was not until the afternoon of the 18th of August that he found himself at the door of No. 14, Tarragon-street. It was a dingy-looking house in a dismal-looking street. Hugo shivered a little as he pulled the tarnished bell-handle. "How can people live in streets like this?" he said to himself, with a slight contemptuous shrug of his shoulders.

"Mr. Vasarif" he said, interrogatively, as a downcast-looking woman came to the door.

"Yes, sir. What name, sir, if you please?"

"Say that a gentleman from Scotland wishes to see him."

The woman gave him a keen look, as if she knew something of the errand upon which Dino Vasari had come to her house; but said nothing, and ushered him at once into a sitting-room on the ground-floor. The room was curtained so heavily that it seemed nearly dark. Hugo could not see whether it was tenanted by more than one person; of one he was sure, because that one person came to meet him with outstretched hands and eager words of greeting.

"Mr. Luttrell! You have come, then; you have come—I knew you would!"

"I beg your pardon," said Hugo, and at the sound of his voice the first speaker fell back amazed; "but I am Hugo Luttrell—not Brian. I come from him."

"A thousand pardons; this English darkness is to blame," said the other, in fluent English speech, though with a slightly foreign accent. "Let us have lights; then we can know each other. I am—Dino Vasari."

He said the name with a certain hesitation, as though not sure whether or no he ought to call himself by it. The light of a candle fell suddenly upon the two faces—which were turned towards one another in some curiosity. The two had a kind of superficial likeness of feature, but a total dissimilarity of expression. The subtlety of Hugo's eyes and mouth was never shown more clearly than when contrasted with the noble gravity that marked every line of Dino's traits. They stood and looked at each other for a moment—Dino, wrapped in admiration; Hugo, lost in a thought of dark significance.

"So you are the man!" he was saying to himself. "You call yourself my cousin, do you? And you want the Strathleckie and the Luttrell estates? Be warned and go back to Italy, my good cousin, while you have time; you will never reach Scotland alive, I promise you. I shall kill you first, as I should kill a snake lying in my path. Never in your life, Mr. Dino Vasari, were you in greater danger than you are just now."

CHAPTER XXI.

A FLASK OF ITALIAN WINE.

"I AM Brian Luttrell's cousin," said Hugo, quietly, "and I come from him."

"Then you know—you know——" Dino stammered, and he looked eagerly into Hugo's face.

"I know all."

"You know where he is now?"

"I do. I have brought you a letter from him—a sort of introduction," said Hugo, with a faint smile. "I trust that you will find it satisfactory."

"No introduction is necessary," was Dino's polite reply. "I have heard him speak of you."

Hugo's eyes flashed an interrogation. What had Brian said of him? But Dino's tones were so courteous, his face so calmly impassive, that Hugo was reassured. He bowed slightly, and placed a card and a letter on the table. Dino made an apology for opening the letter, and moved away from the table whilst he read it.

There was a pause. Hugo's face flushed, his hands twitched a little. He was actually nervous about the success of his scheme. Suppose Dino were to doubt the genuineness of that letter!

It consisted of a few words only, and they were Italian:—

"DINO MIO," it began, "the bearer of this letter is my cousin Hugo, who knows all the circumstances and will explain to you what are my views. I am ill, and cannot come to London. Burn this note.

"BRIAN LUTTRELL."

Dino read it twice, and then handed it to Hugo, who perused it with as profound attention as though he had never seen the document before. When he gave it back, he was almost surprised to see Dino take it at once to the grate, deposit it amongst the coals, and wait until it was consumed to ashes before he spoke. There was a slight sternness of aspect, a compression of the lips, and a contraction of the brow, which impressed Hugo unfavourably during the performance of this action. It seemed to show that Dino Vasari might not be a man so easy to deal with as Brian Luttrell.

"I have done what I was asked to do," he said, drawing himself up to his full height, and turning round with folded arms and darkening brow. "I have burnt his letter, and I should now be glad, Mr. Luttrell, to hear the views which you were to explain to me."

"My cousin Brian——" began Hugo, with some deliberation; but he was not allowed to finish his sentence. Quick as thought, Dino Vasari interrupted him.

"Pardon me, would it not be as well—under the circumstances—to speak of the gentleman in question as Mr. Stretton?"

Hugo shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no objection," he said, "so long as you do not take my calling him by that name to be the expression of my opinion concerning the subject under consideration."

This was so elaborate a sentence that Dino took some little time to consider it.

"I see," he said at last, with a questioning look; "you mean that you are not convinced that he is the son of Vincenza Vasari?"

"Neither is he," said Hugo.

"But if we have proof——"

"Mr. Vasari, you cannot imagine that my cousin will give up his rights without a struggle?"

"But he has given them up," said Dino, vehemently. "He refuses to be called by his own name; he has let the estates pass away from him——"

"But he means to claim his rights again," said Hugo.

"Oh." Then there was a long silence. Dino sat down in a chair facing that of Hugo, and confronted him steadily. "I understood," he said at last, "when I was in Italy, that he had resolved to give up all claim to his name, or to his estate. He had disagreeable associations with both. He determined to let himself be thought dead, and to earn his own living under the name of John Stretton."

"He did do so," said Hugo, softly; "but he has changed his mind."

"And why?"

"If I tell you why, may I ask you to keep what I say a profound secret?"

Dino hesitated. Then he said firmly, "I will keep it secret so long as he desires me to do so."

"Then listen. The reason of his change of mind is this. He has fallen in love. You will ask—with whom? With the woman to whom his estate has passed—Miss Murray. He means to marry her, and in that way to get back the estate which, by his own mad folly, he has forfeited."

"Is this true?" said Dino, slowly. He fixed his penetrating dark eyes upon Hugo as he spoke, and turned a little pale. "And does this lady—this Miss Murray—know who he is? For I hear that he calls himself Stretton in her house. Does she know?"

Hugo deliberated a little. "No," he answered, "I am sure that she does not."

Dino rose to his feet. "It is impossible," he said, with an indignant flash of his dark eyes, which startled Hugo; "Brian would never be so base."

"My only wonder is," murmured Hugo, reflectively, "that Brian should be so clever."

"You call it clever?" said Dino, still more indignantly. "You call it clever to deceive a woman, to marry her for her money, to mislead her about one's name? Are these your English

fashions? Is it clever to break your word, to throw away the love and the help that is offered you, to show yourself selfish, and designing, and false? This is what you tell me about the man whom you call your cousin, and then you ask me to admire his behaviour? Oh, no, I do not admire it. I call it mean, and base, and vile. And that is why he would not come to see me himself; that is why he sent you as an emissary. He could not look me in the face and tell me the things that you have told me!"

He sat down again. The fire died out of his eyes, the hectic colour from his cheek. "But I do not believe it!" he said, more sorrowfully than angrily; and in a much lower voice; "I do not believe that he means to do this thing. He was always good and always true."

Hugo watched him, and spoke after a little pause. "You had his letter," he said. "He told you to believe what I said to you. I could explain his views."

"Ah, but look you, perhaps you do not understand," said Dino, turning towards him with renewed vivacity. "It is a hard position, this of mine. Ever since I was a little child, it was hinted to me that I had English parents, that I did not belong to the Vasari family. When I grew older, the whole story of Vincenza's change of the children was told to me, and I used to think of the Italian boy who had taken my place, and wonder whether he would be sorry to exchange it for mine. I was not sorry; I loved my own life in the monastery. I wanted to be a priest. But I thought of the boy who bore my name; I wove fancies about him night and day; I wished with all my heart to see him. I used to think that the day would come when I should say to him—'Let us know each other; let us keep our secret, but love each other nevertheless. You can be Brian Luttrell, and I will be Dino Vasari, as long as the world lasts. We will not change. But we will be friends."

His voice grew husky; he leaned his head upon his hands for a few moments, and did not speak. Hugo still watched him curiously. He was interested in the revelation of a nature so different from his own; interested, but contemptuous of it, too.

"I could dream in this way," said Dino at last, "so long as no land—no money—was concerned. While Brian Luttrell was the second son the exchange of children was, after all, of very little consequence. When Richard Luttrell died, the position of things was changed. If he had lived, you would never have heard of Vincenza Vasari's dishonesty. The priests knew that there would be little to be gained by it. But when he died my life became a burden to me, because they were always saying—'Go and claim your inheritance. Go to Scotland and dispossess the

man who lords it over your lands, and spends your revenues. Take your rights.'"

"And then you met Brian?" said Hugo, as the narrator paused again.

"I met him and I loved him. I was sorry for his unhappiness. He learnt the story that I had known for so many years, and it galled him. He refused to see the man who really ought to have borne his name. He knew me well enough, but he never suspected that I was Mr. Luttrell's son. We parted at San Stefano with friendly words; he did not suspect that I was leaving the place because I could not bear to see him day by day brooding over his grief, and never tell him that I did not wish to take his place."

"But why did you not tell him?"

"I was ordered to keep silence. The Prior said that he would tell him the whole story in good time. They sent me away, and, after a time, I heard from Father Cristoforo that he was gone, and had found a tutorship in an English family, that he vowed never to bear the name of Luttrell any more, and that the way was open for me to claim my own rights, as the woman Vincenza Vasari had been found and made confession."

"So you came to England with that object?"

"With the object, first," said Dino, lifting his face from his crossed arms, "of seeing him and asking him whether he was resolved to despoil himself of his name and fortune. I would not have raised a hand to do either, but, if he himself did it, I thought that I might pick up what he threw away. Not for myself, but for the Church to which I belong. The Church should have it all."

"Would you give it away?" cried Hugo.

"I am to be a monk. A monk has no property," was Dino's answer. "I wanted to be sure that he did not repent of his decision before I moved a finger."

"You seem to have no scruple about despoiling Miss Murray of her goods," said Hugo, drily.

A fresh gleam shot from the young man's eyes.

"Miss Murray is a woman," he said, briefly. "She does not need an estate. She will marry."

"Marry Brian Luttrell, perhaps."

"If she marries him as Mr. Stretton, she must take the consequences."

"Well," said Hugo, "I must confess, Mr. Vasari, that I do not understand you. In one breath you say you would not injure Brian by a hair's-breadth; in another you propose to leave him and his wife in poverty if he marries Miss Murray."

"No, pardon me, you mistake," replied Dino, gently. "I will never injure him whom you call, Brian, but if he keeps the name of Stretton I shall claim the rights which he has given up. And, when the estate is mine, I will give him and his wife what they want; I will give them half, if they desire it, but I will have what is my own, first of all, and in spite of all."

"You say, in fact, that you will not injure Brian, but that you do not care how much you injure Miss Murray."

"That is not it," cried Dino, his dark eye lighting up and his form positively trembling with excitement. "I say that, if Brian himself had come to me and asked me to spare him, or the woman he loved, for his sake I would have yielded and gone back to San Stefano to-morrow; I would have destroyed the evidence; I would have given up all, most willingly; but when he treats me harshly, coldly—when he will not, now that he knows who I am, make one little journey to see me and tell me what he wishes; when he even tries to deceive me, and to deceive this lady of whom you speak—why, then, I stand upon my rights; and I will not yield one jot of my claim to the Luttrell estate and the Luttrell name."

"You will not?"

"I will fight to the death for it."

Hugo smiled slightly.

"There will be very little fighting necessary, if you have your evidence ready. You have it with you, I presume?"

"I have copies; the original depositions are with my lawyer."

"Ah. And he is——"

"A Mr. Grattan; there is his address," said Dino, placing a card before his visitor. "I suppose that all further business will be transacted through him?"

"I suppose so. Then you have made your decision?"

"Yes. One moment, Mr. Luttrell. Excuse me for mentioning it; but you have made two statements, one of which seems to me to contradict the other." Dino had recovered all his usual coolness, and fixed his keen gaze upon Hugo in a way which that young man found a little embarrassing. "You told me that Brian—as we may still call him—intended to claim his old name once more. Then you said that he meant to marry Miss Murray under the name of Stretton. You will remark that these two intentions are incompatible; he cannot do both these things."

Hugo felt that he had blundered.

"I spoke hastily," he said, with an affectation of ingenuous frankness, which sat very well upon his youthful face. "I believe that his intentions are to preserve the name of Stretton, and to marry Miss Murray under it."

"Then I will tell Mr. Grattan to take the necessary steps to-

morrow," said Dino, rising, as if to hint that the interview had now come to an end.

Hugo looked at him with surprised, incredulous eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Vasari," he said, naively, "don't let us part on these unfriendly terms. Perhaps you will think better of the matter, and more kindly of Brian, if we talk it over a little more."

"At the present moment, I think talk will do more harm than good, Mr. Luttrell."

"Won't you write yourself to Brian?" faltered Hugo, as if he hardly dared to make the sugestion.

"No, I think not. You will tell him my decision.

"I'm afraid I have been a bad ambassador," said Hugo, with an air of boyish simplicity, "and that I have offended you."

"Not at all." Dino held out his hand. "You have spoken very wisely, I think. Do not let me lose your esteem if I claim what I believe to be my rights."

Hugo sighed. "I suppose we ought to be enemies—I don't know," he said. "I don't like making enemies — won't you come and dine with me to-night, just to show that you do not bear me any malice. I have rooms in town; we can be there in a few minutes. Come back with me and have dinner."

Dino tried to evade the invitation. He would much rather have been alone; but Hugo would take no denial. The two went out together without summoning the landlady: Hugo took his companion by the arm, and walked for a little way down the street, then summoned a hansom from the door of a public-house, and gave an address which Dino did not hear. They drove for some distance. Dino thought that his new friend's lodgings were situated in a rather obscure quarter of London; but he made no remark in words, for he knew his own ignorance of the world, and he had never been in England before. Hugo's lodgings appeared to be on the second-floor of a gloomy-looking house, of which the ground-floor was occupied by a public bar and refreshment-room. The waiters were German or French, and the cookery was distinctly foreign in flavour. There was a touch of garlic in every dish, which Dino found acceptable, and which was not without its charm for Hugo Luttrell.

Dessert was placed upon the table, and with it a flask of some old Italian wine, which looked to Dino as if it had come straight from the cellars of the monastery at San Stefano. "It is our wine," he said, with a smile. "It looks like an old friend."

"I thought that you would appreciate it," said Hugo, with a laugh, as he rose and poured the red wine carelessly into Dino's glass. "It is too rough for me; but I was sure that you would like it."

He poured out some for himself and raised the glass, but he scarcely touched it with his lips. His eyes were fixed upon his guest.

Dino smiled, praised his host's thoughtfulness, and swallowed a mouthful or two of the wine; then set down his glass.

"There is something wrong with the flavour," he said: "something a little bitter."

"Try it again," said Hugo, averting his eyes. "I thought it very good. At any rate, it is harmless: one may drink any amount of it without doing oneself an injury."

"Yes, but this is curiously coarse in flavour," persisted Dino. "One would think that it was mixed with some other spirit or cordial. But I must try it again."

He drained his glass. Hugo refilled it immediately, but soon perceived that it was needless to offer his guest a second draught. Dino raised his hand to his brow with a puzzled gesture, and then spoke confusedly.

"I do not know how it is," he said. "I am quite dizzy—I cannot see—I——"

His eyes grew dim: his hands fell to his sides, and his head upon his breast. He muttered a few incoherent words, and then sank into silence, broken only by the sound of his heavy breathing and something like an occasional groan. Hugo watched him carefully, and smiled to himself now and then. In a short time he rose, emptied the remainder of the wine in the flask into Dino's glass, rinsed out the flask with clear water, then poured the dregs, as well as the wine in the glasses, into the mould of a large flower-pot that stood in a corner of the room. "Nobody can tell any tales now, I think," said Hugo, with a triumphant, disagreeable smile. And then he called the waiter and paid his bill—as if he were a temporary visitor instead of having lodgings in the house, as he had led Dino to believe.

The waiter glanced once or twice at the figure on the chair. "Gentleman had a leetle moche to drink," he said, nodding towards poor Dino.

"A little too much," said Hugo, carelessly. "He'll be better soon." Then he went and shook the young man by the arm. "Come,' he said, "it's time for us to go. Wake up; I'll see you home. That wine was a little too strong for you, was it not?"

Dino opened his eyes, half-rose, muttered something, and then sank back in his chair.

"Gentleman want a cab, perhaps?" said the waiter.

"Well, really, I don't know," said Hugo, looking quite puzzled and distressed. "If he can't walk we must have a cab; but if he

can, I'd rather not; his lodgings are not far from here. Come, Jack, can't you try?'

Dino, addressed as Jack for the edification of the waiter, rose, and with Hugo's help staggered a few steps. Hugo was somewhat disconcerted. He had not counted upon Dino's small experience of intoxicating liquors when he prepared that beverage for him beforehand. He had meant Dino to be wild and noisy: and, behold, he presented all the appearance of a man who was dead drunk, and could hardly walk or stand.

They managed to get him downstairs, and there, revived by the fresh air, he seemed able to walk to the lodgings which, as Hugo said, were close at hand. The landlord and the waiters laughed to each other when the two gentlemen were out of sight. "He must have taken a good deal to make him like that," said one of them. "The other was sober enough. Who were they?" The landlord shook his head. "Never saw either of them before yesterday," he said. "They paid, at any rate: I wish all my customers did as much." And he went back to the little parlour which he had quitted for a few moments in order to observe the departure of the gentleman who had got so drunk upon a flask of heady Italian wine.

Meanwhile, Hugo was leading his victim through a labyrinth of dark streets and lanes. Dino was hard to conduct in this manner; he leaned heavily upon his guide, he staggered at times, and nearly fell. The night was dark and foggy; more than once Hugo almost lost his bearings and turned in a wrong direction. But he had a reason for all the devious windings and turnings which he took; he was afraid of being spied upon, followed, tracked. It was not until he came at last to a dark lane, between rows of warehouses, where not a light twinkled in the rooms, nor a solitary pedestrian loitered about the pavement, that he seemed inclined to pause. "This is the place," he said to himself, tightening his grasp upon the young man's arm. "This is the place I chose."

He led Dino down the lane, looking carefully about him until he came to a narrow archway on his left hand. This archway opened on a flagged passage, at the end of which a flight of steps led up to one of the empty warehouses. It was a lonely, deserted spot.

He dragged his companion into this entry; the steps of the two men echoed upon the flags for a little way, and then were still. There was the sound of a fall, a groan, then silence. And after five minutes of that silence, Hugo Luttrell crept slowly back to the lane, and stood there alone. He cast one fearful glance around him: nobody was in sight, nobody seemed to have heard the sounds that he had heard. With a quick step and resolute

mien he plunged again into the network of little streets, reached a crowded thoroughfare at last, and took a cab for the Strand. He had a ticket for a theatre in his pocket. He went to the theatre.

CHAPTER XXII.

BRIAN'S WELCOME.

THE hint given in the Prior's letter concerning Brian's reasons for continuing to teach in the Heron family, together with Hugo's own quickness of perception, had enabled that astute young man to hit upon something very like the exact truth. He had exaggerated it in his conversation with Dino: he had attributed motives to Brian which certainly never entered Brian's mind; but this was done for his own purposes. He thought that Brian's love for Elizabeth Murray might prove a useful weapon in the struggle between Dino's sense of his rights and the romantic affection that he entertained for the man who had taken his place in the world—an affection which Hugo understood so little and despised so much, that he fancied himself sure of an easy victory over Dino's resolution to fight for his rightful position. It was greatly to his surprise that he found so keen a sense of justice and resentment at the little trust that Brian had reposed in him present in Dino's mind: the young man had been irritatingly firm in his determination to posses the Strathleckie estate; he knew precisely what he wanted, and what he meant to do. And although he was inclined to be generous to Brian and to Miss Murray, there seemed no reason to expect that he would be equally generous to Hugo. Therefore Hugo had felt himself obliged to use what he called "strong measures."

He did not like strong measures. They were disagreeable to him. But they were less disagreeable than the thought of being poor. Hugo made little account of human life and human suffering so long as the suffering did not actually touch himself. He seemed to be born with as little heart as a beast of prey, which strikes when it is angry, or when it wants food, with no remorse and no regret. "A disagreeable necessity," Hugo called his evil deed, but he considered that the law of self-preservation justified him in what he did.

And Brian Luttrell? What reason was it that made him fling prudence to the winds, and follow the Herons to the neighbourhood of a place where he had resolved never to show his face again?

There was one great, overmastering reason—so great that it made him attempt what was well-nigh impossible. His love for

Elizabeth Murray had taken full possession of him: he dreamed of her, he worshipped the very ground she trod upon; he would have sacrificed life itself for the chance of a gentle word from her.

Life, but not honour. Much as he loved her, he would have fled to the very ends of the earth if he had known, if he had for one moment suspected, that she was the Miss Murray who owned the landed estate which once went with the house and grounds of Netherglen.

It seemed almost incredible that he should not have had this fact forced from the first upon his knowledge; but such at present was the case. They had remained in Italy for the first three months of his engagement, and, during that time, he had not lived in the Villa Venturi, but simply given his lessons and taken his departure. Sometimes he breakfasted or lunched with the family party, but at such times no business affairs were discussed. And Elizabeth had made it a special request that Mr. Stretton should not be informed of the fact that it was she who furnished money for the expenses of the household. She had taken care that his salary should be as large as she could make it without attracting remark, but she had an impression that Mr. Stretton would rather be paid by Mr. Heron than by her. And, as she wished for silence on the subject of her lately-inherited wealth, and as the Herons were of that peculiarly happy-go-lucky disposition that did not consider the possession of wealth a very important circumstance, Mr. Stretton passed the time of his sojourn in Italy in utter ignorance of the fact that Elizabeth was the provider of villa, gardens, servants, and most of the other luxuries with which the Herons were well supplied. Percival, in his outspoken dislike of the arrangement, would probably have enlightened him if they had been on friendly terms; but Percival showed so decided and unmistakable an aversion to the tutor, that he scarcely spoke to him during his stay, and, indeed, made his visit a short one, chiefly on account of Mr. Stretton's presence.

The change from Italy to Scotland was made at the doctor's suggestion. The children's health flagged a little in the heat, and it was thought better that they should try a more bracing air. When the matter was decided, and Mr. Colquhoun had written to them that Strathleckie was vacant, and would be a convenient house for Miss Murray's purposes in all respects—then, and not till then, was Mr. Stretton informed of the proposed change of residence, and asked whether he would accompany the family to Scotland.

Brian hesitated. He knew well enough the exact locality of

the house to which they were going: he had visited it himself in other days. But it was several miles from Netherglen: he would be allowed, he knew, to absent himself from the drawing-room or the dinner-table whenever he chose, he need not come in contact with the people whom he used to know. Besides, he was changed beyond recognition. And probably the two women at Netherglen led so retired a life that neither of them was likely to be encountered—not even at church; for, although the tenants of Netherglen and Strathleckie went to the same town for divine worship on Sunday mornings, yet Mrs. Luttrell and Angela attended the Established Church, while the Herons were certain to go to the Episcopal. And Hugo was away. There was really small chance of his being seen or recognised. He thought that he should be safe. And, while he still hesitated, he looked up and saw that the eyes of Miss Murray were bent upon him with so kindly an inquiry, so gracious a friendliness in their blue depths, that his fears and doubts suddenly took wing, and he thought of nothing but that he should still be with her.

He consented. And then, for the first time, it crossed his mind to wonder whether she was a connection of the Murrays to whom his estate had passed, and from whom he believed that Mr. Heron was renting the Strathleckie house.

He had left England without ascertaining what members of the Murray family were living; and the letter in which Mr. Colquhoun detailed the facts of Elizabeth's existence and circumstances, had reached Geneva after his departure upon the expedition which was supposed to have resulted in his death. He had never heard of the Herons. He imagined Gordon Murray to be still living—probably with a large family and a wife. He knew that they could not live at Netherglen, and he wondered vaguely whether he should meet them in the neighbourhood to which he was going. Murray was such an ordinary name that in itself it told him nothing at all. Elizabeth Murray! Why, there might be a dozen Elizabeth Murrays within twenty miles of Netherglen: there was no reason at all to suppose that this Elizabeth Murray was a connection of the Gordon Murrays who were cousins of his own—no, not of his own: he had forgotten that never more could he claim that relationship for himself. They were cousins of some unknown Brian Luttrell, brought up under a false name in a small Italian village. What had become of that true Brian, whom he had refused to meet at San Stefano? And had Father Cristoforo succeeded in finding the woman whom he sought, and supplying the missing links in the evidence? In that case, the Murrays would soon hear of the

claimant to their estate, and there would be a lawsuit. Brian began to feel interested in the matter again. He had lost all care for it in the period following upon his illness. He now foresaw, with something almost like pleasure, that he could easily obtain information about the Murrays if he went with the Herons to Strathleckie. And he should certainly take the first opportunity of making inquiries. Even if he himself were no Luttrell, there was no reason why he should not take the deepest interest in the Luttrells of Netherglen. He wanted particularly to know whether the Italian claimant had come forward.

He was perfectly ignorant of the fact of which Father Cristoforo's letter would have informed him, that this possible Italian claimant was no other than his friend, Dino Vasari.

Of course, he could not be long at Strathleckie without finding out the truth about Elizabeth. If he had lived much with the Herons, he would have found it out in the course of the first twenty-four hours. Elizabeth's property was naturally referred to by name: the visitors who came to the house called upon her rather than upon the Herons: it was quite impossible that the secrecy upon which Elizabeth had insisted in Italy could be maintained in Scotland. The only wonder was that he should live, as he did live, for five whole days at Strathleckie without discovering the truth. Perhaps Elizabeth took pains to keep it from him!

She had been determined to keep another secret, even if she could not hide the fact, that she was a rich woman. She would not have her engagement to Percival made public. For two whole years, she said, she would wait: for two whole years neither she nor her cousin should consider each other as bound. But that she herself considered the engagement morally binding might be inferred from the fact of her allowing Percival to kiss her—she surely would not have permitted that kiss if she had not meant to marry him! So Percival himself understood it; so Elizabeth knew that he understood.

She was not quite like herself in the first days of her residence in Scotland. She was graver and more reticent than usual: little inclined to talk, and much occupied with the business that her new position entailed upon her. Mr. Colquhoun, her solicitor, was astonished at her clear-headedness; Stewart, the factor, was amazed at the attention she bestowed upon every detail; even the Herons were surprised at the methodical way in which she parcelled out her days and devoted herself to a full understanding of her position. She seemed to shrink less than heretofore from the responsibilities that wealth would bring her, and perhaps the added seriousness of her lip and brow was

due to her resolve to bear the burden that providence meant her to bear instead of trying to lay it upon other people's shoulders.

A great deal of this necessary business had been transacted before Mr. Stretton made his appearance at Strathleckie. He had been offered a fortnight's holiday, and had accepted it, seeing that his absence was to some extent desired by Mrs. Heron, who was always afraid lest her dear children should be overworked by their tutor. Thus it happened that he did not reach Strathleckie until the very day on which Hugo also arrived on his way to Netherglen. They had seen each other at the station, where Brian incautiously appeared without the blue spectacles which he relied upon as part of his disguise. From the white, startled horror which overcast Hugo's face, the young man saw that he had been almost, if not quite, recognised; and he expected to be sought out and questioned as to his identity. But Hugo made no effort to question him: in fact, he did not see the tutor again until the day when he came to restore a fragment of the letter which Brian had carelessly dropped in the road before he read it. During this interview he betrayed no suspicion, and Brian comforted himself with the thought that Hugo had, at any rate, not read the sheet that he returned to him.

A dog-cart was sent for him and his luggage on the day of his arrival. He had a five miles' drive before he reached Strathleckie, where he received a tumultuous welcome from the boys, a smiling one from Mrs. Heron and Kitty, a hearty shake of the hands from Mr. Heron. But where was Elizabeth? He did not dare to ask.

She was out, he learnt afterwards: she had driven over to the town to lunch with the Colquhouns. For a moment he did think this strange; then he put aside the thought and remembered it no more.

There was a long afternoon to be dragged through: then there was a school-room tea, nominally at six, really not until nearly seven, according to the lax and unpunctual fashion of the Heron family. Mr. Stretton had heard that there were to be guests at dinner, and, keeping up his character as a shy man, declined to be present. He was sitting in a great arm-chair by the cheerful, little fire, which was very acceptable even on an August evening: the clock on the mantelpiece had just chimed a quarter-past seven, and he was beginning to wonder where the boys could possibly be, when the door opened and Elizabeth came in. He rose to his feet.

"They told me that you had come," she said, extending her hand to him with quiet friendliness. "I hope you had a pleasant journey, Mr. Stretton."

"Very pleasant, thank you."

He could not say more: he was engaged in devouring with his eyes every feature of her fair face, and thinking in his heart that he had underrated the power of her beauty. In the fortnight that he had been away from her he had pictured her to himself as not half so fair. She had taken off her out-door things, and was dressed in a very plain, brown gown, which fitted closely to her figure. At her throat she wore a little bunch of sweet autumn violets, with one little green leaf, fastened into her dress by a gold brooch. It was the very ostentation of simplicity, yet, with that noble carriage of her head and shoulders, and those massive coils of golden-brown hair, nobody could have failed to remark the distinction of her appearance, nor to recognise the fact that there is a kind of beauty which needs no ornament.

Brian took off the ugly, blue spectacles which he had adopted of late, and laid them upon the mantelshelf. He did not need them in the flickering firelight, which alone illumined the dimness of the room.

Elizabeth laid her shapely arm upon the mantelpiece and looked into the fire. He stood beside her, looking down at her—for he was a little taller than herself—but she seemed unconscious of his gaze. She spoke presently in rather low tones.

"The boys are late. I hope they do not often keep you waiting in this way."

"They have never done it before. I do not mind."

"They were very anxious to have you back. They missed you very much."

Had she missed him, too? He could not venture to ask that question.

"You will find things changed," she went on, restlessly lifting a little vase upon the mantelpiece and setting it down again; "you will find us much busier than we used to be—much more absorbed in our own pursuits. Scotland is not like Italy."

"No. I wish it were."

"And I——" Her voice broke, as if some emotion troubled her; there came a swift, short sigh, and then she spoke more calmly. "I wish sometimes that one had no duties, no responsibilities; but life would not be worth having if one shirked them, after all."

"There is a charm in life without them—at least, so far without them as that pleasant life in Italy used to be," said he, rather eagerly.

"Yes, but that is all over."

"All over?"

She bowed her head.

"Is there nothing left?" said Brian, approaching her a little more nearly. Then, as she was silent, he continued in a hurried, low voice, "I knew that life must be different here, but I thought that some of the pleasantest hours might be repeated—even in Scotland—although we are without those sunny skies and groves of orange trees. Even if the clouds are grey, and the winds howl without, we might still read Dante's 'Paradiso' and Petrarca's 'Sonnets,' as we used to do at the Villa Venturi."

"Yes," said Elizabeth, gently, "we might. But here I shall not have time."

"Why not? Why should you sacrifice yourself for others in the way you do? It is not right."

"I—sacrifice myself?" she said, lifting her eyes for a moment to his face. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "that I have watched you for the last three months, and I have seen you day after day give up your own pleasure and your own profit for others, until I longed to ask them what right they had to claim your whole life and leave you nothing—nothing—for yourself——"

"You mistake," she interrupted him quickly. "They leave me all I want; and they were kind to me when I came amongst them—a penniless child——"

"What does it matter if you were penniless?" said Brian. "Have you not paid them a thousand times for all that they did for you?" Then, as she looked at him with rather a singular expression in her eyes, he hastened to explain. "I mean that you have given them your love, your care, your time, in a way that no sister, no daughter, ever could have done! You have taught the children all they know; you have sympathised with the cares of every one in turn—I have watched you and seen it day by day! And I say that even if you are penniless, as you say, you have repaid them a thousand times for all that they have done; and that you are wrong to let them take your time and your care, to the exclusion of your own interests. I beg your pardon; I have said too much," he said, breaking off suddenly, as the singular expression deepened upon her musing face.

"No," she said, with a smile, "I like to hear it: go on. What ought I to do?"

"Ah, that I cannot tell you. But I think you give yourself almost too much to others. Surely, no one could object if you took a little time from the interests of the rest of the family for your own pleasure, for your studies, your amusements?"

"No," she answered, quietly, "I do not suppose they would."

She stood and looked into the fire, and the smile again crossed her face.

"I have said more than I ought to have done," repeated Brian. "Forgive me."

"I will forgive you for everything," she said, "except for thinking that one can do too much for the people that one loves. I am sure that you do not act upon that principle, Mr. Stretton."

"It can be carried to an extreme, like any other," said Mr. Stretton, wisely.

"And you think I carry it to an extreme? Oh, no. I only do what it is a pleasure to me to do. Think of the situation: an orphaned, penniless girl—that is what you have said to yourself is it not——?"

"Yes," said Brian, wondering a little at the keen inquiry in her eyes as she paused for the reply. The questioning look was lost in a lovely smile as she proceeded; she cast down her eyes to hide the expression of pleasure and amusement that his words had caused.

"An orphaned, penniless girl, then, cast on the charity of friends who were then not very well able to support her, educated by them, loved by them—does she not owe them a great debt, Mr. Stretton? What would have become of me without my uncle's care? And, now that I am able to repay them a little—in various ways"—she hesitated as she spoke—"ought I not to do my best to please them? Ought I not to give them as much of myself as they want? Make a generous answer, and tell me that I am right."

"You are always right—too right!" he said, half-impatiently. "If you could be a little less generous——"

"What then?" said Elizabeth.

"Why, then, you would be—more human, perhaps, more like ourselves—but less than what we have always taken you for," said Mr. Stretton, smiling.

Elizabeth laughed. "You have spoilt the effect of your lecture," she said, turning away.

"I beg your pardon. I ought not to have said what I did," said Brian, sensitively alive to her slightest change of tone. "Miss Murray, tell me at least that I have not offended you before you go."

"You have not offended me," she said. He could not see her face.

"You are quite sure?" he said, anxiously. "For, indeed, I had forgotten that it was not my part to offer any opinion upon your conduct, and I am afraid that I have given it with impertinent bluntness. You will forgive me?"

She turned round and looked at him with a smile. There was a colour in her cheek, a softness in her eye, that he did not

often see. "Indeed, Mr. Stretton," she said, gently, "I have nothing to forgive. I am very much obliged to you."

He took a step towards her as if there was something else that he would have gladly said; but at that moment the sound of the boys' voices echoed through the hall.

"There is no time for more," said Brian, with some annoyance.

"No," she answered. "And yet I have something else to say to you. Will you remember that some other day?

"Indeed, I shall remember," he said, fervently. And then the boys burst into the room, and in the hubbub of their arrival Elizabeth escaped.

Her violets had fallen out of her brooch. Brian found them upon the floor when she had gone; henceforth he kept them amongst his treasures.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WISHING WELL.

HUGO'S first call at Strathleckie was made on the day following Mr. Stretton's arrival. Father Cristoforo's letter had been delivered by that morning's post, and it was during a stroll, in which, to tell the truth, Brian was more absorbed by the thought of Elizabeth than by any remembrance of his own position or of the Prior's views, that he dropped the letter of which the contents had so important a bearing on his future life. In justice to Brian, it must be urged that he had no idea that the Prior's letter was likely to be of any importance. Ever since he left San Stefano, the Prior had corresponded with him; but his letters were generally on very trivial subjects, or filled with advice upon moral and doctrinal points, which Brian could not find interesting. The severe animadversions upon his folly in returning to Scotland under an assumed name, which filled the first sheet, did not rouse in him any lively desire to read the rest of the letter. It was not likely to contain anything that he ought to know; and, at any rate, he could explain the loss and apologise for it in his next note to Padre Cristoforo.

The meeting between him and Elizabeth in the garden, which had been such a revelation to Hugo's mind, was purely accidental and led to no great result. She had been begged by the children to ask Mr. Stretton for a holiday. They wanted to go to a Wishing Well in the neighbourhood, and to have a picnic in honour of Kitty's birthday. Mr. Stretton was sure not to refuse them they said—if Elizabeth asked. And Mr. Stretton did not refuse.

His love for Elizabeth—that love which had sprung into being

almost as soon as he beheld her, and which had grown with every hour spent in her company—was one of those deep and overmastering passions which a man can feel but once in a lifetime, and which many men never feel at all. If Brian had lived his life in London and at Netherglen with no great shock, no terrible grief, no overthrow of all his hopes, he might not have experienced this glow and thrill of passionate emotion; he might have walked quietly into love, made a suitable marriage, and remained ignorant to his life's end of the capabilities for emotion which existed within him. But, as often happens immediately after the occurrence of a great sorrow or recovery from a serious illness, his whole being seemed to undergo a change. When the strain of anxiety and prolonged anguish of mind was relaxed, the claims of youth re-asserted themselves. With returning health and strength there came an almost passionate determination to enjoy as much as remained to be enjoyed in life. The sunshine, the wind, the sea, the common objects of Nature,

"To him were opening Paradise,"

And when, for the first time, Love also entered into his life, the world seemed to be transfigured. Although he had suffered much and lost much, he found it possible to dream of a future in which he might make for himself a home, and know once more the meaning of happiness. Was he selfish in hoping that life still contained a true joy for him, in spite of the sorrows that fate had heaped upon his head, as if she meant to overwhelm him altogether? At least, the hope was a natural one, and showed courage and resolution. He clung to it desperately, fiercely; he felt that after all he had lost he could not bear to let it go. The hope was too sweet—the chance of happiness too beautiful—to be lost. He felt as if he had a right to this one blessing. He had lost all beside. But, perhaps, this was a presumptuous mood, destined to rebuke and disappointment.

The fourth day after his arrival dawned, and he had not yet perceived, in his blindness of heart, the difference of position between the Elizabeth of his dreams and the Elizabeth of reality. Could the crisis be averted very much longer?

He fancied that Elizabeth was colder to him after that little scene in the study than she had ever been before. She looked pale and dispirited, and seemed to avoid speaking to him or meeting his eye. At breakfast-time that morning he noticed that she allowed a letter that had been brought to her to lie unopened beside her plate "It's from Percival, isn't it?" said Kitty, thoughtlessly. "You don't seem to be very anxious to read it." Elizabeth made no answer, but the colour rose to her cheek and then spread to the very roots of her golden-brown

hair. Brian noticed the blush, and for the first time felt his heart contract with a bitter pang of jealousy. What right had Percival Heron to write letters to Elizabeth? Why did she blush when she was asked a question about a letter from him?

The whole party set off soon after ten o'clock for an expedition to a little loch amongst the hills. They intended to lunch beside the loch, then to enjoy themselves in different ways: Mr. Heron meant to sketch; Mrs. Heron took a novel to read; the others proposed to visit a spring at some little distance known as "The Wishing Well." This programme was satisfactorily carried out; but it chanced that Kitty and the boys reached the well before the others, and then wandered away to reach a further height, so that Brian and Elizabeth found themselves alone together beside the Wishing Well.

It was a lonely spot from which nothing but stretches of barren moor and rugged hills could be discerned. One solitary patch of verdure marked the place where the rising spring had fertilised the land; but around this patch of green the ground was rich only in purple heather. Not even a hardy pine or fir tree broke the monotony of the horizon. Yet, the scene was not without its charm. There was grandeur in the sweep of the mountain-lines. there was a wonderful stillness in the sunny air, broken only by the buzz of a wandering bee and the trickle of the stream: there was the great arch of blue above the moor, and the magical tints of purple and red that blossoming heather always brings out upon the mountain-sides. The bareness of the land was forgotten in its wealth of colouring; and perhaps Brian and Elizabeth were not wrong when they said to each other that Italy had never shown them a scene that was half so fair.

The water of the spring fell into a carved stone basin, which, tradition said, had once been the font of an old Roman Catholic chapel, of which only a few scattered stones remained. People from the surrounding districts still believed in the efficacy of its waters for the cure of certain diseases; and the practice of "wishing," which gave the well its name, was resorted to in sober earnest by many a village boy and girl. Elizabeth and Brian, who had hitherto behaved in a curiously grave and reserved manner to each other, laughed a little as they stood beside the spring and spoke of the superstition.

"We must try it," said Elizabeth, looking down into the sparkling water. "A crooked pin must be thrown in, and then we must silently wish for anything we especially desire, and, of course, we shall obtain it."

"Quite worth trying, if that is the case," said Brian. "But—I have tried the experiment before."

"Here?"

"Yes, here."

"I did not know that you had been to Dunmuir before."

"My wish did not come to pass," remarked Brian; "but there is no reason why you should not be more successful than I was, Miss Murray. And I feel a certain sort of desire to try once again."

"Here is a crooked pin," said Elizabeth. "Drop it into the water."

"Are you going to try?" he asked, when the ceremony had been performed.

"There is nothing that I wish for very greatly."

"Nothing? Ah, I have one wish—only one."

"I am unfortunate in that I have none," said Elizabeth.

"Then give me the benefit of your wishes. Wish that my wish may be fulfilled," said Brian.

She hesitated for a moment, then smiled, and threw a crooked pin into the water.

"I have wished," she said, as she watched it sink, "but I must not say what I wish: that breaks the charm."

"Sit down and rest," said Brian, persuasively, as she turned away. "There is a little shade here; and the others will no doubt join us by-and-bye. You must be tired."

"I am not tired, but I will sit down for a little while," said Elizabeth.

She seated herself on a stone beside the well; and Brian also sat down, but rather below her, so that he seemed to be sitting at her feet, and could look up into her face when he spoke. He kept silence at first, but said at last, with gentle deference of tone:—

"Miss Murray, there was something that you said you would tell me when you had the opportunity."

She paused before she answered.

"Not just now," he understood her to say at last, but her words were low and indistinct.

"Then—may I tell you something?"

She spoke more clearly in reply.

"I think not.'

"Forgive me for saying so, but you must hear it some time. Why not now?"

She did not speak. Her colour varied a little, and her brows contracted with a slight look of pain.

"I do not know how to be silent any longer," he said, raising his eyes to her face, with a grave and manly resolve in their brown depths. "I have thought a great deal about it—about you; and it seems to me that there is no real reason why I

should not speak. You are of age; you can do as you please; and I could work for both—because—Elizabeth—I love you."

It was brokenly, awkwardly said, after all; but more completely uttered, perhaps, than if he had told his tale at greater length, for then he would have been stopped before he reached the end. As it was, Elizabeth's look of terror and dismay brought him to a sudden pause.

"Oh, no!" she said, "no; you don't mean that. Take back what you have said, Mr. Stretton."

"I cannot take it back," he said, quickly, "and I would not if I could; because you love me, too."

The conviction of his words made her turn pale. She darted a distressed look at him, half-rose from her seat, and then sat down again. Twice she tried to speak and failed, for her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. But at last she found her voice.

"You do not know," she said, hurriedly and hoarsely, "that I am engaged to my cousin Percival."

He rose to his feet, and withdrew two or three paces, looking down on her in silent consternation. She did not lift her eyes, but she felt that his gaze was upon her. It seemed to pierce to the very marrow of her bones, to the bottom of her heart.

"Is this true?" he said at last, in a voice as changed as her own had been—hoarse and broken almost beyond recognition. "And you never told me?"

"Why should I have told you? Only my uncle knows. It was a secret," she answered, in a clearer and colder tone. "I am sorry you did not know."

"So am I. God knows that I am sorry," said the young man turning away to hide the look of bitter despair and disappointment, which he could not help but feel was too visibly imprinted on his face. "For if I had known, I might never have dared to love you. If I had known, I should never have dreamt of you as my wife."

At the sound of these two words, a shiver ran through her frame, as if a cold wind had blown over her from the mountain-heights above. She did not speak, however, and Brian went on in the low, difficult voice which told the intensity of his feelings more clearly than his words.

"I have been blind—mad, perhaps—but I thought that there was a hope for me. I fancied that you cared for me a little, that you guessed what I felt—that you, perhaps, felt it also. Oh, you need not tell me that I have been presumptuous. I see it now. But it was my one hope in life—I had nothing left; and I loved you."

His voice sank; he still stood with his face averted; a bitter

silence fell upon him. For the moment he thought of the many losses and sorrows that he had experienced, and it seemed to him that this was the bitterest one of all. Elizabeth sat like a statue; her face was pale, her under-lip bitten, her hands tightly clasped together. At the end of some minutes' silence she roused herself to speak. There was an accent of hurt pride in her voice, but there was a tremor, too.

"I gave you no reason to think so, Mr. Stretton," she said.

"No," he answered, still without turning round. "I see now; I made a mistake."

"That you should ever have made the mistake," said Elizabeth, slowly, "seems to me——"

She did not finish the sentence. She spoke so slowly that Brian found it easy to interrupt her. He turned and broke impetuously into the middle of her phrase.

"It seems an insult—I understand. But I do not mean it as an insult. I mean it only as a tribute to your exquisite goodness, your sweetness, which would not let me pass upon my way without a word of kindly greeting—and yet what can I say, for I did not misunderstand that kindliness. I was not such a fool as to do that! No, I never really hoped; I never thought that you could for a moment look at me; believe me when I say that, even in my wildest dreams, I knew myself to be far, infinitely far, below you, utterly unworthy of your love, Elizabeth."

"No, no," she murmured, "you must not say that."

"But I do say it, and I mean it. I only ask to be forgiven for that wild dream—it lasted but for a moment, and there was nothing in it that could have offended even you, I think; nothing but the love itself. And I believe in a man's right to love the woman who is the best, the most beautiful, the noblest on earth for him, even if she were the Queen herself! If you think that I hoped where I ought to have despaired, forgive me; but don't say you forgive me for merely loving you; I had the right to do that."

She altered her attitude as he spoke. Her hands were now before her face, and he saw that the tears were trickling between her fingers. All the generosity of the man's nature was stirred at the sight.

"I am very sorry that I have distressed you," he said. "I am sorry that I spoke so roughly—so hastily—at first. Trust me when I say that I will not offend in the same way again."

She lifted her face a little, and tried to wipe away her tears. "I am not offended, Mr. Stretton," she said. "You mistake me—I am only sorry—deeply sorry—that I—if I—have misled you in any way."

"Oh, you did not mislead me, Miss Murray," replied Brian, gently; "it was my own folly that was to blame. But since I have spoken, may I say something more? I should like, if possible, to justify myself a little in your eyes."

She bowed her head. "Will you not sit down?" she said, softly. "Say what you like; or, at least, what you think best."

He did not sit down exactly, but he came back to the stone on which he had been sitting at her feet, and dropped on one knee upon it.

"Let me speak to you in this way, as a culprit should speak," he said, with a faint smile which had in it a gleam of some slightly ironical feeling, "and then you can pardon or condemn me as you choose."

"If you feel like a culprit you condemn yourself," said Elizabeth, lifting her eyes to his.

"I do not feel like a culprit, Miss Murray. I have, as I said before, a perfect right to love you if I choose——" Elizabeth's eyes fell, and the colour stole into her cheeks—"I would maintain that right against all the world. But I want you to be merciful: I want you to listen for a little while——"

"Not to anything that I ought not to hear, Mr. Stretton."

"No: to nothing that would wrong Mr. Percival Heron even by a thought. Only—it is a selfish wish of mine; but I have been misjudged a good deal in my life, and I do not want you to misjudge me—I should like you to understand how it was that I dared—yes, I dared—to love you. May I speak?"

"I don't know whether I ought to listen. I think I ought to go," said Elizabeth, with an irrepressible little sob. "No, do not speak—I cannot bear it."

"But in justice to me you ought to listen," said Brian, gently, and yet firmly. He laid one hand upon her's, and prevented her from rising. "A few words only," he said, in pleading tones. "Forgive me if I say I must go on. Forgive me if I say you must listen. It is for the last—and the only—time."

With a great sigh she sank back upon the stone seat from which she had tried to rise. Brian still held her hand. She did not draw it away. The lines of her face were all soft and relaxed; her usual clearness of purpose had deserted her. She did not know what to do.

"If you had loved me, Elizabeth—let me call you Elizabeth just for once; I will not ask to do it again—or if you had even been free—I would have told you my whole history from beginning to end, and let you judge how far I was justified in taking another name and living the life I do. But I won't lay that

burden upon you now. It would not be fair. I think that you would have agreed with me—but it is not worth while to tell you now."

"I am sure that you would not have acted as you did without a good and honourable motive," said Elizabeth, trembling, though she did not know why.

"I acted more on impulse than on principle, I am afraid," he answered. "I was in great trouble, and it seemed easier—but I saw no reason afterwards to change my decision. Elizabeth, my friends think me dead, and I want them to think so still. I had been accused of a crime which I did not commit—not publicly accused, but accused in my own home by one—one who ought to have known me better; and I had inadvertently—by pure accident, remember—brought great misery and sorrow upon my house. In all this—I could swear it to you, Elizabeth—I was not to blame. Can you believe my word?"

"I can, I do."

"God bless you for saying so, my love—the one love of my life—Elizabeth! Forgive me: I will not say it again. To add to my troubles, then, I found reason to believe that I had no right to the name I bore, that I was of a different family, a different race, altogether; that it would simplify the disposal of certain property if I were dead; and so—I died I disappeared. I can never again take the name that once was mine."

He said all this, but no suspicion of the truth crossed Elizabeth's mind. That she was the person who had benefited by his disappearance was as far from her thoughts as from Brian's at that moment. That he was the Brian Luttrell of whom she had so often heard, whose death in the Alps had seemed so certain that even the law courts had been satisfied that she might rightfully inherit his possessions, that he—John Stretton, the boys' tutor—could be this dead cousin of her's, was too incredible a thought ever to occur to her. She felt nothing but sorrow for his past troubles, and a conviction that he was perfectly in the right.

"But you are deceiving your friends," she said.

"For their good, as I firmly believe," answered Brian, sorrowfully. "If I went back to them, I should cause a great deal of confusion and distress: I should make my so-called heirs uncomfortable and unhappy, and, as far as I can see, I should have no right to the property that they would not consent to retain if I were living"

"Have they a right to it then?"

"Yes—if I am dead, and if no one else appears to claim it. It is a complicated business, and one that would take some time to explain. Let it suffice that I was utterly hopeless, utterly

miserable, when I cast away what had always seemed to me to be my birthright; that I was then for many months very ill; and that, when you met me in Italy, I was just winning my way back to health, and repose of mind and body. And then—do you remember how you looked and spoke to me? Of course, you do not know. You were good, and sweet, and kind: you stretched out your hand to aid a fallen man, for I was poorer and more friendless than you knew; and from the moment when you said you trusted me, as we sat together on the bench upon the cliff, my whole soul went out to you, Elizabeth, and I loved you as I never had loved before—as I never shall love again."

"In time," she murmured, "you will learn to care for someone else. in time you will forget me."

"Forget you? I can never forget you, Elizabeth. Your trust in me—an unknown, friendless man · your goodness to me, your sweet pity for me, will never be forgotten. Can you wonder if I loved you, and if I thought that my love must surely have betrayed itself? I fancied that you guessed it——"

"No, no," she said, hurriedly. "I did not guess. I did not think. I only knew that you were a kind friend to me, and taught me and helped me in many ways. I have been often very lonely—I never had a friend."

"Is Percival Heron, then, no friend to you?" he asked, with something of indignant sternness in his voice.

"Ah, yes, he is a friend; but not—not—I cannot tell you what he is——"

"But you love him?" cried Brian, the sternness changing to anguish, as the doubt first presented itself to him. "Elizabeth, do not tell me that you have promised yourself to a man that you do not love! I may be miserable; but do not let me think that you will be miserable, too."

He caught both her hands in his and looked her steadily in the face. "I have heard them say that you never told a lie in all your life," he went on. "Speak the truth still, Elizabeth, and tell me whether you love Percival Heron as a woman should love a man? Tell me the truth."

She shrank a little at first, and tried to take her hands away. But when she found that Brian's clasp was firm, she drew herself up and looked him in the face with eyes that were full of an unutterable sadness, but also of a resolution which nothing on earth could shake.

"You have no right to ask me the question," she said; "and I have no right to give you any answer."

But something in her troubled face told him what that answer would have been.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"GOOD-BYE."

"I see," he said, dropping her hands and turning away with a heavy sigh. "I was too late."

"Don't misunderstand me," said Elizabeth, with an effort. "I shall be very happy. I owe a debt to my uncle and my cousins which scarcely anything can repay."

"Give them anything but yourself" he said, gravely. "It is not right—I do not speak for myself now, but for you—it is not right to marry a man whom you do not love."

"But I did not say that I do not love him," she cried, trying to shield herself behind this barrier of silence. "I said only that you had no right to ask the question."

Brian looked at her and paused.

"You are wrong," he said at last, but so gently that she could not take offence. "Surely one who cares for you as I do may know whether or not you love the man that you are going to marry. It is no unreasonable question, I think, Elizabeth. And if you do not love him, then again I say that you are wrong; and that it is not like your brave and honest self to be silent."

"I cannot help it," she said, faintly. "I must keep my word."

"You are the best judge of that," he answered. But there was a little coldness in his tone.

"Yes, I am the best judge," she went on more firmly. "I have promised; and I will not break the promise that I have made. I told you before how much I consider that I owe to them. Now that I have the chance of doing a thing that will benefit, not only Percival, but all of them—from a worldly point of view, I mean—I cannot bear to think of drawing back from what I said I would do."

"How will it benefit them?"

"In a very small way, no doubt," she said, looking aside, so that she might not see the mute protest of his face; "because worldly prosperity is a small thing after all; but if you had seen, as I have, what it was to my uncle to live in a poverty-stricken, sordid way, hampered with duns and debts, and Percival harassing himself with vain endeavours to set things straight, and the children feeling the sting of poverty more and more as they grew older—and then to know that one has the power in one's hands of remedying everything, without giving pain or hurting any one's pride, or——"

"I am sorry," said Brian, as she hesitated for a word. "But I do not understand."

"Why not?"

"How can you set things straight? And how is it that things want setting straight? Mr. Heron is—surely—a rich man."

She laughed; even in the midst of her agitation, she laughed a soft, pleasant, little laugh.

"Oh, I forgot," she said, suddenly. "You do not know. I found out on the day you came that you did not know."

"Did not know—what?"

She raised her eyes to his face, and spoke with gravity, but great sweetness.

"Nobody meant to deceive you," she said; "in fact, I scarcely know how it is that you have not learnt the truth—partly, I suppose, because in Italy I begged them not to tell anybody the true state of the case; but, really, my uncle is not rich at all. He is a poor man. And Percival is poor, too—very poor," she added, with a lingering sigh over the last two words.

"Poor! But—how could a poor man travel in Italy, and rent the Villa Venturi, to say nothing of Strathleckie?"

"He did not rent it. They were my guests."

"Your guests? And what are they now, then?"

"My guests still."

Brian rose to his feet.

"Then you are a rich woman?"

"Yes."

"It is you, perhaps, who have paid me for teaching these boys?"

"There is no disgrace in being paid for work that is worth doing and that is done well," said Elizabeth, flashing an indignant look at him.

He bowed his head to the rebuke.

"You are right, Miss Murray. But you will, I hope, do me the justice to see that I was perfectly ignorant of the state of affairs; that I was blind—foolishly blind——"

"Not foolishly. You could not help it."

"I might have seen. I might have known. I took you for——" And there Brian stopped, actually colouring at the thought of his mistake.

"For the poor relation; the penniless cousin. But it was most natural that you should, and two years ago it would have been perfectly true. I have not been a rich woman for very many months, and I do not love my riches very much."

"If I had known," began Brian; and then he burst out with a sudden change of tone. "Give them your riches, since they value them and you do not, and give yourself to me, Elizabeth. Surely your debt to them would then be paid."

"What! by recompensing kindness with treachery?" she said,

glancing at him mournfully. "No, that plan would not answer. The money is a small part of what I owe them. But I do sometimes wish that it had gone to anybody but me; especially when I remember the sad circumstances under which it became mine. When I think of poor Mrs. Luttrell of Netherglen, I have never felt as if it were right to spend her sons' inheritance in what gave pleasure to myself alone."

"Mrs. Luttrell of——But what have you to do with her?" said Brian, with a sudden fixity of feature and harshness of voice that alarmed Elizabeth. "Mrs. Luttrell of Netherglen! Good Heaven! It is not you—you—who inherited that property? The Luttrell-Murrays——"

"I am the only Luttrell-Murray living," said Elizabeth.

He stared at her dumbly, as if he could not believe his ears.

"And you have the Luttrell estate?" he said at last.

"I have."

"I am glad of it," he answered; and then he put his hand over his eyes for a second or two, as if to shut out the light of day. "Yes, I am very glad."

"What do you mean, Mr. Stretton?" said Elizabeth, who was watching him intently. "Do you know anything of my family? Do you know anything of the Luttrells?"

"I have met some of them,' he answered, slowly. His face was paler than usual, and his eyes, after one hasty glance at her, fell to the ground. "It was a long time ago. I do not know them now."

"You said you had been here before. You——"

"Miss Murray, don't question me as to how I knew them. You cannot guess what a painful subject it is to me. I would rather not discuss it."

"But, Mr. Stretton——"

"Let me tell you something else," he said, hastily, as if anxious to change the subject. "Let me ask you—as you are the arbitress of my destiny, my employer, I may call you—when you will let me go. Could the boys do without me at once, do you think You would soon find another tutor."

"Mr. Stretton! Why should you go? Do you mean to leave us?" exclaimed Elizabeth. "Oh, surely it is not necessary to do that!"

"Do you think it would be so easy for me, then, to take money from your hands after what has passed between us?"

"Money is a small thing," said she.

"Money! yes; but there are other things in the world beside money. And it is better that I should go away from you now. It is not for my peace to see you every day, and know that you

are to marry Percival Heron. Cannot you guess what pain it is to me?"

"But the children: you have no love for them, then. I thought that you did love our little Jack—and they are so fond of you."

"Don't try to keep me," he said, hoarsely. "It is hard enough to say good-bye without having to refuse you anything. The one thing now for which I could almost thank God is that you never loved me, Elizabeth."

She shivered, and drew a long, sobbing breath. Her face looked pale and cold: her voice did not sound like itself as she murmured—

"Why?"

"Because—no, I can't tell you why. Think for yourself of a reason. It is not that I love you less; and yet—yet—not for the world would I marry you now that I know what I know."

"You would not marry me because I am rich: that is it, is it not?" she asked him. "I knew that some men were proud; but I did not think that you would be so proud."

"What does it signify? There is no chance of your marrying me; you are going to marry another man—whom you do not love; we may scarcely ever see each other again after to-day. It is better so."

"If I were free," she said, slowly, "and if—if—I loved you, you would be doing wrong to leave me because—only because—I was a little richer than you. I do not think that that is your only motive. It is since you heard that I was one of the Luttrell-Murrays that you have spoken in this way."

"What if it were? The fact remains," he said, gloomily. "You do not care for me; and I—I would give my very soul for you, Elizabeth. I had better go. Think of me kindly when I am away—that is all. I see Miss Heron and the boys on the brow of the hill signalling to us. Will you excuse me if I say good-bye to you now, and walk back towards Strathleckie?"

"Must it be now?" she said, scarcely knowing what the words implied. She turned her face towards him with a look that he never forgot—a look of inexpressible regret, of yearning sweetness, of something only too like the love that he thought he had failed to win. It caused him to turn back and to lean over her with a half-whispered question—

"Would it have been possible, Elizabeth, if we had met earlier, do you think that you ever could have loved me?"

"Do you think you ought to ask me?"

"Ah, give me one word of comfort before I go. Remember that I go for ever. It will do no one any harm. Could you have loved me, Elizabeth?"

"I think I could," she murmured in so low a tone that he could hardly hear the words. He seized her hands and pressed them closely in his own; he could do no more, for the Herons were very near. "Good-bye, my love, my own darling!" were the last words she heard. They rang in her ears as if they had been as loud as a trumpet-call; she could hardly believe that they had not re-echoed far and wide across the moor. She felt giddy and sick. The last sight of his face was lost in a strange, momentary darkness. When she saw clearly again he was walking away from her with long, hasty strides, and her cousins were close at hand. She watched him eagerly, but he did not turn round. She knew instinctively that he had resolved that she should never see his face again.

"What is the matter, Betty?" cried one of the children. "You look so white! And where is Mr. Stretton going? Mr. Stretton! Wait for us!"

"Don't call Mr. Stretton, said Elizabeth, collecting her forces, and speaking as nearly as possible in her ordinary tone. "He wants to get back to Strathleckie as quickly as possible. I am rather tired and am resting."

"You are not usually tired with so short a walk," said Kitty, glancing sharply at her cousin's pallid cheeks. "Are you not well?"

"Yes, I am quite well," Elizabeth answered. "But I am very, very tired."

And then she rose and made her way back to the loch-side, where Mr. and Mrs. Heron were still reposing. But her steps lagged, and her face did not recover its usual colour as she went home, for, as she had said, she was tired—strangely and unnaturally tired—and it was with a feeling of relief that she locked herself into her own room at Strathlecklie, and gave way to the gathering tears which she had hitherto striven to restrain. She would willingly have stayed away from the dinner-table, but she was afraid of exciting remark. Her pale face and heavy eyelids excited remark as much as her absence would have done; but she did not think of that. Mr. Stretton, who usually dined with them, sent an excuse to Mrs. Heron. He had a headache, and preferred to remain in his own room.

"It must have been the sun," said Mrs. Heron. "Elizabeth has a headache, too. Have you a headache, Kitty?"

"Not at all, thank you," said Kitty.

There was something peculiar in her tone, thought Elizabeth. Or was it only that her conscience was guilty, and that she was becoming apt to suspect hidden meanings in words and tones that used to be harmless and innocent enough? The idea was

a degrading one to her mind. She hated the notion of having anything to conceal—anything, at least, beyond what was lawful and right. Her inheritance, her engagement to Percival, had been to some extent kept secret; but not, as she now said passionately to herself, not because she was ashamed of them. Now, indeed, she was ashamed of her secret, and there was nothing on earth from which she shrank so much as the thought of its being discovered.

She went to bed early, but she could not sleep. The words that Brian had said to her, the answers that she had made to him, were rehearsed one after the other, turned over in her mind, commented on, and repeated again and again all through the night. She hardly knew the meaning of her own excitement of feeling, nor of the intense desire that possessed her to see him again and listen once more to his voice. She only knew that her brain was in a turmoil and that her heart seemed to be on fire. Sleep! She could not think of sleep. His face was before her, his voice was sounding in her ears, until the cock crew and the morning sunlight flooded all the room. And then for a little while, indeed, she slept, and dreamt of him.

She awoke late and unrefreshed. She dressed leisurely, wondering somewhat at the vehemence of last night's emotion, but not mistress enough of herself to understand its danger. In that last moment of her interview with Brian she had given way far more than he knew. If he had understood and taken advantage of that moment of weakness, she would not have been able to refuse him anything. At a word she would have given up all for him—friends, home, riches, even her promise to Percival — and gone forth into the world with the man she loved, happier in her poverty than she had ever been in wealth. "Ask me no more, for at a touch I yield," was the silent cry of her inmost soul. But Brian had not understood. He did not dream that with Elizabeth, as with most women, the very weakest time is that which immediately follows the moment of greatest apparent strength. She had refused to listen to him at all—and after that refusal she was not strong, but weak in heart and will as a wearied child.

Realising this, Elizabeth felt a sensation of relief and safety. She had escaped a great gulf—and yet—and yet—she had not reached that point of reasonableness and moderation at which she could be exactly glad that she had escaped.

She made her way downstairs, and reached the dining-room to find that everyone but herself had breakfasted and gone out. She was too feverish to do more than swallow a cup of coffee and a little toast, and she had scarcely concluded her scanty meal

before Mr. Heron entered the room with a disconcerted expression upon his face.

"Do you know the reason of this freak of Stretton's, Elizabeth?" he asked almost immediately.

"What do you mean, Uncle Alfred?"

"I mean—has he taken a dislike to Strathleckie, or has anybody offended him? I can't understand it. Just when we were settling down so nicely, and found him such an excellent tutor for the boys! To run away after this fashion! It is too bad!"

"Does Mr. Stretton think of leaving Strathleckie?" said Elizabeth, with her eyes bent steadfastly upon the tablecloth.

"Think of leaving! My dear Lizzie, he has left! Gone: went this morning before any of us were down. Spoke to me last night about it; I tried to dissuade him, but his mind was quite made up."

"What reason did he give?"

"Well, he would not tell me the exact reason. I tried to find out, but he was as close as—as—wax," said Mr. Heron, trying to find a suitable simile. "He said he was much obliged to us all for our kindness to him; had no fault to find with anything or anybody; liked the place; but, all the same, he wanted to go, and go he must. I offered him double the salary—at least, I hinted as much: I knew you would not object, Lizzie dear, but it was no use. Partly family affairs; partly private reasons: that was all I could get out of him."

Mr. Heron's long speech left Elizabeth the time to consider what to say.

"It does not matter very much," she answered at length, indifferently: "we can find someone who will teach the boys quite as well, I have no doubt.

"Do you think so?" asked Mr. Heron. "Well, perhaps so. But, you see, it is not always easy to get a tutor at this time of the year, Elizabeth; and, besides, we shall not find one, perhaps, so ready to read Italian with you, as Mr. Stretton used to do——"

Oh, those Italian readings! How well she remembered them! How the interest which Mr. Stretton had from the first inspired in her had grown and strengthened in the hours that they spent together, with heads bent over the same page, and hearts throbbing in unison over the lines that spoke of Dante's Beatrice, or Petrarca's Laura! She shuddered at the remembrance, now fraught to her with keenest pain.

"I shall not want to read Italian again," she said, rising from the table. "We had better advertise for a tutor, Uncle Alfred,

unless you think the boys might run wild for a little while, or unless Percival can find us one."

"Shall you be writing to Percival to-day, my dear?"

"I don't know."

"Because you might mention that Mr. Stretton has left us. I am afraid that Percival will be glad," said Mr. Heron, with little laugh; "he had an unaccountable dislike to poor Stretton."

"Yes, Percival will be glad," said Elizabeth, turning mechanically to leave the room. At the door she paused. "Mr. Stretton left an address, I suppose?"

"No, he did not. He said he would write to me when his plans were settled. And I'm sorry to say he would not take a cheque. I pressed it upon him, and finally left it on the table for him—where I found it again this morning. He said that he had no right to it, leaving as suddenly as he did—some crochet of that kind. I should think that Stretton could be very Quixotic if he chose."

"When he writes," said Elizabeth, "you will send him the cheque, will you not, Uncle Alfred? I do not think that he is very well off; and it seems a pity that he should be in want of money for the sake of—of—a scruple."

She did not wait for a reply, but closed the door behind her, and stood for a few moments in the hall, silently wondering what to do and where to go. Finally she put on her garden hat and went out into the grounds. She felt that she must be alone.

A sort of numbness came over her. He had gone, without a word, without making any effort to see her again. His "Good-bye" had been spoken in solemn earnest. He had been stronger than Elizabeth; although in ordinary matters it might be thought that her nature was the stronger of the two. There was nothing, therefore, for her to say or do; she could not write to him, she could not call him back. If she could have done so she would. She had never known before what it was to hunger for the sight of a beloved face, to think of the words that she might have said, and long to say them. She did not as yet know by what name to call her misery. Only, little by little she woke up to the fact that it was what people meant when they spoke of love. Then she began to understand her position. She had promised to marry Percival Heron, but her heart was given to the penniless tutor who called himself John Stretton.

CHAPTER XXV.

A COVENANT.

BRIAN had no fixed notion of what he should do, but he thought it better to go to London, where he could more easily decide on

his future movements. He was in no present difficulty, for the liberal salary which he had received from the Herons during the past few months was almost untouched, and although he had just now a morbid dislike to touching the money that had come to him through Elizabeth's generosity, he had the sense to see that he must make use of it, and turn it to the best possible account.

In the course of his journey he bought a newspaper. His eyes fell almost immediately upon a paragraph which caused him some amazement.

"MYSTERIOUS CASE OF ATTEMPTED MURDER.—A young man of respectable appearance was discovered early this morning in a state of complete insensibility at the end of a passage leading out of Mill-street, Blackfriars. He was found to have received a severe wound, presumably with a knife, in the left side, and had lost a considerable amount of blood, but, although weak, was still living. His watch and purse had not been abstracted, a fact which points to the conclusion either that the wound was inflicted by a companion in a drunken brawl, or that the thief was disturbed in his operations before the completion of the work. The young man speaks a little English as well as Italian, but he has not yet been able to give a precise account of the assault committed upon him. It is thought that the police have a clue to the criminal. The name given in the gentleman's pocket-book is Vasari; and he has been removed to Guy's Hospital, where he is reported to be doing well."

"Vasari! Dino Vasari! can it be he?" said Brian, throwing down his newspaper. "What brings him to London?"

Then it occurred to him that Father Cristoforo's long letter might have contained information concerning Dino's visit to London: possibly he had been asked to do the young Italian some service, which, of course, he had been unable to render as he had not read the letter. He felt doubly vexed at his own carelessness as he thought of this possibility, and resolved to go to the hospital and see whether the man who had been wounded was Dino Vasari or not. And then he forgot all about the newspaper paragraph, and lost himself in sad reflections concerning the unexpected end of his connection with the Herons.

Arrived in London, he found out a modest lodging, and began to arrange his plans for the future. A fit of restlessness seemed to have come upon him. He could not bear to think of staying any longer in England. He paid a visit next morning to an Emigration Agency Office, asking whether the agents could direct him to the best way of obtaining suitable work in the Colonies. He did not care where he went or what he did; his

preference was for work in the open air, because he still at times felt the effect of that brain-fever which had so nearly ended his existence at San Stefano; but his physique was not exactly of the kind which was most suited to bush-clearing and sheep-farming. This he was told, and informed, moreover, that so large a number of clerks arrived yearly in Australia and America, that the market in that sort of labour was over-stocked, and that, if he was a clerk, he had a better chance in the Old World than in the New.

"I am not a clerk; I have lately been a tutor," said Brian.

References?

He could refer them to his late employer.

A degree? Oxford or Cambridge?

And there the questions ceased to be answered satisfactorily. He could not tell them that he had been to Oxford, because he dared not refer them to the name under which he studied at Balliol. He hesitated, blundered a little—he certainly had never mastered the art of lying with ease and fluency—and created so unfavourable an impression in the mind of the emigration agent that that gentleman regarded him with suspicion from that moment, and apparently ceased to wish to afford him any aid.

"I am very sorry," he said, politely, "but I don't think that we have anything that would suit you. There is a college at Dunedin where they want a junior master, but there, a man with a good degree and—hum—unimpeachable antecedents would be required. People out there are in want of men with a trade: not of clerks, nor of poor professional men."

"Then I must go as a hodman or a breaker of stones," said Brian, "for I mean to go."

"I don't think that that employment is one for which you are especially fitted, Mr. Smith," said the agent, with a slight smile. Brian had impatiently given the name of Smith in making his application, and the agent, who was a man of wide experience, did not believe that it was his own; "but, of course, if you like to try it, you can look at these papers about 'assisted passages.'"

"Thank you, that is not necessary," answered Brian, rather curtly. "A steerage passage to Australia does not cost a fortune. If I go out as a labouring man I think I can manage it. But I am obliged to you for your kindness in answering my questions."

He had resumed his usual manner, which had been somewhat ruffled by the tone taken by the agent, and now asked one or two practical questions respecting the fares, the lines of steamers, and matters of that kind; after which he bade the agent a courteous good-morning and went upon his way.

He foresaw that the inevitable cloud hanging over his past story would prove a great obstacle to his obtaining employment in the way he desired. Any work requiring certificates or testimonials was utterly out of the question for him in England. In Australia or New Zealand things might be different. He had no great wish to go to America—he had once spent a summer holiday in the Eastern States, and did not fancy that they would be agreeable places of residence for him in his present circumstances, and he had no great desire to "go West;" besides, he had a wish to put as great a distance as possible between himself and England. As he walked away from the emigration office he made up his mind to take the first vessel that sailed for Sydney.

He had nothing to do. He wanted to divert his mind from thoughts of Elizabeth. It flashed across his mind that he would go to the hospital and inquire after the man who had been stabbed, and who called himself Vasari.

He made his request to see the patient, and was admitted with such readiness that he suspected the case to be a dangerous one. And, indeed, the house-surgeon acknowledged this to be so. The stab, he said, had gone wonderfully near the vital parts; a hair's-breadth deviation to the right or left, and Vasari would have been a dead man. It was still uncertain whether he would recover, and all agitation must be avoided, as he was not allowed either to move or speak.

"I am not sure whether he is the young man I used to know or not," said Brian, doubtfully. "Vasari—was there a Christian name given as well?"

"Yes: Bernardino, and in another place simply Dino. Was that the name of your friend?"

"Yes, it was. If I saw him I should be sure. I don't suppose that my appearance would agitate him," said Brian, little suspecting the deep interest and importance which would attach to his visit in Dino's mind.

"Come, then." And the surgeon led the way to the bed, hidden by a screen from the rest of the ward, where Dino lay.

Brian passed with the nurse inside the screen, and looked pityingly at the patient.

"Yes," he said, in a low tone, "it is the man I know."

He thought that Dino was unconscious, but at the sound of his voice—low though it was—the patient opened his eyes, and fixed them upon Brian's face. Brian had said that his appearance would produce no agitation, but he was mistaken. A sudden change passed over that pale countenance. Dino's great dark eyes seemed to grow larger than ever; his face assumed a still

more deathly tinge; the look of mingled anguish and horror was unmistakable. He tried to speak, he tried to rise in his bed, but the effort was too great, and he sank back insensible The indignant nurse hustled Brian away, and would not allow him to return; he ought to have known, she said, that the sight of him would excite the patient. Brian had not known, and was grieved to think that his visit had been unacceptable. But that did not prevent him from writing an account of the state in which he had found Dino Vasari to his friend, Padre Cristoforo; nor from calling at the hospital every day to inquire after the state of his Italian friend. He was glad to hear at last that Dino was out of danger; then, that he was growing a little stronger; and then that he had expressed a desire to see the English gentleman when he called again.

By this time he had, to some extent, changed his plans. Neither Australia nor New Zealand would be his destination. He had taken his passage in a vessel bound for Pernambuco, and a very short time remained to him in England. He was glad to think that he should see Dino before he went.

He found the young man greatly altered: his eyes gleamed in orbits of purple shadow: his face was white and wasted. But the greatest change of all lay in this—that there was no smile upon his lips, no pleasure in his eyes, when he saw Brian draw near his bed.

"Dino!" said Brian, holding out his hand. "How did you come here, amico mio?" And then he noticed the absence of any welcoming word or gesture on Dino's part. The large dark eyes were bent upon him questioningly, and yet with a proud reserve in their shadowy depths. And the blue-veined hands locked themselves together upon the coverlet instead of returning Brian's friendly grasp.

"Why have you come?" said Dino, in a loud whisper. "What do you want?"

"I want nothing save to ask how you are and to see you again," replied Brian, after a pause of astonishment.

"If you want to alter your decision it is not yet too late. I have taken no steps towards the claiming of my rights."

"His mind must be wandering," thought Brian to himself. He added aloud in a soothing tone, "I have made no decision about anything, Dino. Can I do anything for you?"

Dino looked at him long and meditatively. Brian's face expressed some surprise, but perfect tranquility of mind. He had seated himself at Dino's bed-side, and was leaning his chin upon his hand and his elbow upon his crossed knees.

"Why did you make Hugo Luttrell your messenger? Why

not come to meet me yourself as Padre Cristoforo begged you to do?"

Brian shook his head. "I don't think you had better talk, Dino," he said. "You are feverish, surely. I will come and see you again to-morrow."

"No, no; answer my question first," said Dino, a slight flush rising to his thin cheeks. "Why could you not come yourself?"

"When?"

"When! You know."

"Upon my honour, Dino, I don't know what you mean."

"You—you—had a letter from Padre Cristoforo—about me? said Dino, stammering with eagerness.

Brian looked guilty. "I was a great fool, Dino," he said, penitently. "I had a letter from him, and I managed to lose it before I had read more than the first sheet, in which there was nothing about you. I suppose he told me in that letter why you came to London, and asked me to meet you or something; and I wish I had met you, if it would have prevented this unfortunate accident of yours, or whatever it was. My own carelessness is always to blame," said Brian, with a heavy sigh, "and I don't wonder that you look coldly upon me, Dino, when I seem to have done you such an unfriendly turn. But I don't think I need say that I never meant to do it."

"How did you know that I was here?" asked Dino, with breathless interest.

"I saw in the papers an account of your being found insensible from a wound in your side. The name Vasari was mentioned, and I came to see if it could possibly be you."

Dino was silent for a few minutes. Then his face lighted up his pale lips parted with a smile. "So you never read Father Cristoforo's letter?" he said. "And you sent me no message of reply?"

"Certainly not. How could I, when I did not know that you were in England?"

Dino held out his hands. "I misjudged you," he said, simply, "Will you forgive me and take my hand again?"

Brian clasped his hand. "You know there's nothing to forgive," he said, with a smile. "But I am glad you don't think I neglected you on purpose, Dino. I had not forgotten those pleasant days at San Stefano."

Dino smiled, too, but did not seem inclined to speak again. The nurse came to say that the interview had lasted long enough, and Brian took his leave, promising to come on the morrow, and struck with the look of perfect peace and quiet upon the placid

face as it lay amongst the white pillows, almost as white as they.

He had only a couple of days left before he was to start for Pernambuco, where he had heard of work that was likely to suit him. He had made his arrangements, taken his passage in the steerage: he had nothing to do now but to write a farewell letter to Mr. Heron, telling him whither he was bound, and another—should he write that other or should he not?—to Elizabeth. He felt it hard to go without saying one last farewell to her. The discovery that she was the heiress of his property had finally decided him to leave England. He dared not risk the chance of being recognised and identified, if such recognition and identification would lead to her poverty. For even if, by a deed of gift in his supposed name of Brian Luttrell, he devised his wealth to her, he knew that she would never consent to take it if he were still alive. The doubt thrown on his birth and parentage would not be conclusive enough in her mind to justify her in despoiling him of what all the judges in the land would have said was his birthright. But then Brian did not know that Vincenza Vasari had been found. The existance of another claimant to the Luttrell estate never troubled him in the least. He wronged nobody, he thought, by allowing Elizabeth Murray to suppose that Brian Luttrell was dead.

He wrote a few lines to Mr. Heron, thanking him for his kindness, and informing him that he was leaving England for South America; and then he proceeded to the more difficult task of writing to Elizabeth. He destroyed many sheets of paper, and spent a great deal of time in the attempt, although the letter, as it stood at last, was a very simple affair, scarcely worthy of the pains that had been bestowed upon it.

"DEAR MISS MURRAY," he wrote, "when you receive this note I shall have left England, but I cannot go without one word of farewell. You will never know how much you did for me in those early days of our acquaintance in Italy; how much hope you gave me back, how much interest in life you inspired in me; but for all that you did I thank you. Is it too much to ask you to remember me sometimes? I shall remember you until the hour of my death. Forgive me if I have said too much. God bless you, Elizabeth! Let me write that name once, for I shall never write to you nor see your face again."

He put no signature. He could not bear to use a false name when he wrote to her; and he was sure that she would know from whom the letter came.

He went out and dropped it with his own hands into a letter-box; then he came back to his dreary lodgings, never expecting

to find there anything of interest. But he found something that interested him very much indeed. He found a long and closely written letter from the Prior of San Stefano.

Father Cristoforo could not resist the opportunity of lecturing his young friend a little. He gave him a good many moral maxims before he came to the story that he had to tell, and he pointed them by observing rather severely that if it were not for Brian's carelessness, his pupil might possibly have escaped the "accident" that had befallen him. For if Brian had met Dino in London on the appointed day, he would not have been wandering alone in the streets (as Father Cristoforo imagined him to have been) or fallen into the hands of thieves and murderers.

With which prologue the Padre once more began his story. And this time Brian read it all.

He put down the letter at last with a curious smile: the smile of a man who does not want to acknowledge that he suffers pain. "Dino," he said to himself, lingeringly. "Dino! It is he who is Brian Luttrell, then, after all. And what am I? And, oh, my poor Elizabeth! But she will only regret the loss of the money because she will no longer be able to help other people. The Herons will suffer more than she. And Percival Heron! How will it affect him? I think he will be pleased. Yes, I think he is disinterested enough to be thoroughly pleased that she is poor. I should be pleased, in his case.

"There is no doubt about it now, I suppose," he said, beginning to pace up and down the little room, with slow, uneven steps and bent head. "I am not a Luttrell. I am a Vasari. My mother's name was Vincenza Vasari—a woman who lied and cheated for the sake of her child. And I was the child! Good God! how can it be that I have that lying blood in my veins? Yet I have no right to say so; it was all done for me—for me—who never knew a mother's love. Oh, mother, mother, how much happier your son would have been if you had reared him in the place where he was born, amongst the vines and olive-yards of his native land.

"And I must see Dino to-morrow. So he knows the whole story. I understand now why he thought ill of me for not coming to meet him, poor fellow! I must go early to-morrow."

He went, but as soon as he reached Dino's bed-side he found that he knew not what to say, Dino looked up at him with eyes full of grave, wistful affection, and suddenly smiled, as if something unwontedly pleasant had dawned upon his mind.

"Ah," he said, "at last—you know."

"Yes, I know," said Brian.

"And you are sorry? I am sorry, too."

"No, said Brian, finding it rather difficult to express himself at that moment; "I am not sorry that you are the man who will bear the name of Luttrell, that I have wrongly borne so long. I suppose—from what the Prior says—that your claim can be proved; if I were in my old position I should be the first to beg you to prove it, and to give up my name and place to you if justice required it. As it is, I do not stand in your way, because the old Brian Luttrell—the one who killed his brother, you know—is dead."

"But if you were in your old position, could you still pardon me and be friendly with me, even if I claimed my rights?"

"I hope so," said Brian. "I hope that I should not be so ungenerous as to look upon you as an enemy because you wished to take your own place amongst your own kindred. You ought rather to look upon me as your enemy, because I have occupied your place so long."

"You are good—you are generous—you are noble!" said Dino, his eyes suddenly filling with tears. "If all the world were like you! And do you know what I shall do if the estate ever becomes mine? You shall take the half—you may take it all, if it please you better. But we will divide it, at any rate, and be to each other as brothers, shall we not? I have thought of you so often!"

He spoke ardently, eagerly; pressing Brian's hands between his own from time to time. It was from an impulse as strong and simple as any of Dino's own that Brian suddenly stooped down and kissed him on the forehead. The caress seemed natural enough to Dino: it was as the ratification of some sacred bond to the English-bred Brian Luttrell. Henceforth, the two became to each other as brothers, indeed; the interests of one became the interests of the other. Before long, Dino learnt from Brian himself the whole of his sad story. He lay with shining eyes and parted lips, his hand clasped in Brian's, listening to his account of the events of the last two years. The only thing that Brian did not touch upon was his love for Elizabeth. That wound was too recent to be shown, even to Dino, who had leaped all at once, as it seemed, into the position of his bosom friend. But Dino guessed it all.

As Brian walked back to his lodgings from the hospital, he was haunted by a verse of Scripture which had sprung up in his mind, and which he repeated with a certain sense of pleasure as soon as he recollected the exact words. "And it came to pass"—so ran the verse that he remembered—"when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." He liked the words. He looked them out in a Bible

belonging to his landlady when he reached home, and he found another verse that touched him, too. "Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul."

Had not Brian Luttrell and Dino Vasari made a covenant?

The practical result of their friendship was an important one to Brian. He sacrificed his passage money, and did not sail on the following day for Pernambuco.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ELIZABETH'S CONFESSION.

"I WONDER whats he wants with me," said Percival Heron, meditatively. He was sitting at his solitary breakfast-table, having pushed from him an empty coffee-cup and several newspapers: a letter from Elizabeth was in his hands. It consisted of a few lines only, and the words that had roused his wonderment were these:—

"I am very anxious to see you. Could you come down to Strathleckie at once? If not, pray come as soon as possible."

"I suppose she is too true a woman to say exactly what she wants," said Percival, a gay smile curling his lips beneath his black moustache. "Perhaps she won't be very angry with me this time if I press her a little on the subject of our marriage. We parted on not very good terms last time, rather *en délicatesse*, if I'm not mistaken, after quarrelling over our old subject of dispute, the tutor. Well, my lady's behests are to be obeyed. I'll wire an acceptance of the invitation and start to-night."

He made the long journey very comfortably, grumbling now and then in a good-tempered way at Elizabeth for sending for him in so abrupt a fashion; but on the whole he felt pleased that she had done so. It showed that she had confidence in him. And he was very anxious for the engagement to be made public: its announcement would be a sort of justification to him in allowing her to do as much as she had done for his family. Percival had, in truth, always protested against her generosity, but failed in persuading his father not to accept it. Mr. Heron was too simple-minded to see why he should not take Elizabeth's gifts, and Mrs. Heron did not see the force of Percival's arguments at all.

"Elizabeth is not here, then," he said to Kitty, who met him at the station.

"No," answered Kitty in rather a mysterious voice. "She wouldn't come."

"Why wouldn't she come?" said Percival, sharply. He followed his sister into the waggonette as he spoke: he did not

care about driving, and gladly resigned the reins to the coachman.

"I can't tell you. I don't think she is well.'

"Not well? What's the matter?"

"I don't know. She always has a headache. Did she want you to come, Percival?"

"She wrote to ask me."

"I'm glad of that."

"Kitty, will you have the goodness to say what you mean, instead of hinting?"

Kitty looked frightened.

"I don't mean anything," she said, hurriedly, while a warm wave of colour spread itself over her cheeks and brow.

"Don't mean anything? That's nonsense. You should not say anything then. Out with it, Kitty. What do you think is wrong with Elizabeth?"

"Oh, Percival, don't be so angry with me," said Kitty, with the tears in her eyes. "Indeed, I scarcely meant to speak; but I did wish you to understand beforehand——"

"What?"

"I don't think she wants to marry you." And then Kitty glanced up from under her thick, curling lashes, and was startled at the set and rigid change which suddenly came over her brother's features. She dared not say any more, and for some minutes they drove on in silence. Presently, Percival turned round to her with an icy sternness in his voice.

"You should not say such things unless you have authority from Elizabeth to say them. Did she tell you to do so?"

"No, no, indeed she did not," cried Kitty, "and, of course, I may be mistaken; but I came to see you, Percival, on purpose to tell you."

"No woman is happy unless she is making mischief," said her brother, grimly.

"You ought not to say that, Percival; it is not fair. And I must say what I came to say. Elizabeth is very unhappy about something. I don't know what; and after all her goodness to us you ought to be careful that you are not making her do anything against her will."

"Did you ever know Elizabeth do anything against her will?"

"Against her wishes, then," said Kitty, firmly, "and against the dictates of her heart."

"'These be fine words, indeed!'" quoted Percival, with a savage laugh. "And who has taught you to talk about the 'dictates of her heart?' Leave Elizabeth and me to settle our affairs

between ourselves, if you please. We know our duty to each other without taking advice from a little school-girl."

Kitty stifled a sob. "If you break Elizabeth's heart," she said, vehemently, "you can't say I didn't warn you."

Percival looked at her, stifled a question at the tip of his tongue, and clutched his newspaper viciously. It occurred to him that Kitty knew something, that she would never have uttered a mere vague suspicion; but he would not ask her a direct question. No, Elizabeth's face and voice would soon tell him whether she was unhappy.

He was right. Kitty had seen the parting between Brian and Elizabeth; and she had guessed a great deal more than she saw. She spoke out of no desire to make mischief, but from very love for her cousin and care for her happiness; but when she noted Percival's black brows she doubted whether she had done right.

Percival did not speak again throughout the drive. He sat with his eyes bent on his newspaper, his hand playing with his moustache, a frown on his handsome face. It was not until the carriage stopped at the door of Strathleckie, and he had given his hand to Kitty to help her down that he opened his lips.

"Don't repeat what you have said to me to any other person, please."

"Of course not, Percival."

There was no time for more. The barking of dogs, the shouts of children, the greeting of Mr. Heron, prevented anything further. Percival looked round impatiently. But Elizabeth was not there.

He was tired, although he would not confess it, with his night journey; and a bath, breakfast, and change of clothes did not produce their usual exhilarating effect. He found it difficult to talk to his father or to support the noise made by the children. Kitty's hint had put his mind into a ferment.

"Can these boys not be sent to their lessons?" he said, at last, knitting his brows.

"Oh, don't you know?" said Harry, cutting a delighted caper. "We have holidays now. Mr. Stretton has gone away. He went away a fortnight ago, or nearly three weeks now."

Percival looked suddenly at Kitty, who coloured vividly.

"Why did he go?" he asked.

"I'm sure I can't tell you," said Mr. Heron, almost peevishly. "Family affairs, he said. And now he has gone to South America. I don't understand it at all."

Neither did Percival.

"Where is Elizabeth?" said Mr. Heron, looking round the room as if in search of her. "She can't know that Percival has come; go and tell her, one of you boys."

"No, never mind," said Percival, quickly; but it was too late, the boy was gone.

There was a little silence. Percival sat at one side of the whitely-draped table, with a luxurious breakfast before him and a great bowl of autumn flowers. The sunshine streamed in brightly through the broad, low windows; the pleasant room was fragrant with the scent of the burning wood upon the fire; the dogs wandered in and out, and stretched themselves comfortably upon the polished oak floor. Kitty sat in a cushioned window-seat and looked anxious; Mr. Heron stood by the fireplace and moved one of the burning logs in the grate with his foot. A sort of constraint had fallen over the little party, though nobody quite knew why; and it was not dispelled, even when Harry's footsteps were heard upon the stairs, and he threw open the door for Elizabeth.

Percival threw down his serviette and started up to meet her. And then he knew why his father and sister looked uncomfortable. Elizabeth was changed; it was plain enough that Elizabeth must be ill.

She was thinner than he had ever seen her, and her face had grown pale. But the fixed gravity and mournfulness of her expression struck him even more than the sharpened contour of her features or the dark lines beneath her eyes. She looked as if she suffered: as if she was suffering still.

"You are ill!" he said, abruptly, holding her by the hand and looking down into her face.

"That's what I've been saying all along!" muttered Mr. Heron. "I knew he would be shocked by her looks. You should have prepared him, Kitty."

"I have had neuralgia, that is all," said Elizabeth, quietly.

"Strathleckie does not suit you; you ought to go away," remarked Percival, devouring her with his eyes. "What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing: I am perfectly well; except for this neuralgia," she said, with a faint, vexed smile. "Did you have a comfortable journey, and have you breakfasted?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Then you will come out with me for a little stroll? I want to show you the grounds; and the others can spare you to me for a little while," she went on, with perfect ease and fluency. The only change in her manner was its unusual gravity, and the fact that she did not seem able to meet Percival's eye. "Are you too tired?"

"Not at all." And they left the room together.

She took him down the hill on which the house stood, by a

narrow, winding path, to the side of a picturesque stream in the valley below. He had seen the place before, but he followed her without a word until they reached a wooden seat close to the water's edge, with its back fixed to the steep bank behind it. The rowan trees, with their clusters of scarlet berries, hung over it, and great clumps of ferns stood on either hand. It was an absolutely lonely place, and Percival knew instinctively that Elizabeth had brought him to it because she could here speak without fear of interruption.

"It is a beautiful place, is it not?" she said, as he took his seat beside her.

He did not answer. He rather disdained the trivial question. He was silent for a few minutes, and then said briefly:—

"Tell me why you wanted me."

"I have been unhappy," she said, simply.

"That is easy to be seen.'

"Is it? Oh, I am sorry for that. But I have had neuralgia. I have, indeed. That makes me look pale and tired."

Percival threw his arm over the back of the seat with an impatient motion, and looked at the river. "Nothing else?' he asked, drily. "It seems hardly worth while to send for me if that was all. The doctor would have done better."

"There is something else," said Elizabeth, in so quiet and even a voice as to sound almost indifferent.

"Well, I supposed so. What is it?"

"You are making it very hard for me to tell you, Percival," said she, with one of her old, straight glances. "What is it you know? What is it you suspect?"

"Excuse me, Elizabeth, I have not said that I know or suspect anything. Everybody seems a little uncomfortable, but that is nothing. What is the matter?"

As she did not answer, he turned and looked at her. Her face was pale, but there was a look of indomitable resolve about her which made him flinch from his purpose of maintaining a cold and reserved manner. A sudden fear ran through his heart lest Kitty's warning should be true!

"Elizabeth," he said, quickly and passionately, "forgive me for the way in which I have spoken. I am an ill-tempered brute. It is my anxiety for you that makes me seem so savage. I cannot bear to see you look as you do: it breaks my heart!"

Her lip trembled at this. She would rather that he had preserved his hard, sullen manner: it would have made it more easy for her to tell her story. She locked her hands closely together, and answered in low, hesitating tones:—

"I am not worth your anxiety. I did not mean to be—untrue

—to you, Percival. I suffered a great deal before I made up my mind that I had better tell you—everything."

A tear fell down her pale cheek unheeded. Percival rose to his feet.

"I don't think there is much to tell, is there?" he said. "You mean that you wish to give me up, to throw me over? Is that all?"

His words were calm, but the tone of ironical bitterness in which they were uttered cut Elizabeth to the quick. She lifted her head proudly.

"No," she said, "you are wrong. I wish nothing of the kind."

He stood in an attitude of profound attention, waiting for her to explain. His face wore its old, rigid look: the upright line between his brows was very marked indeed. But he would not speak again.

"Percival," she said—and her tone expressed great pain and profound self-abasement—"when I promised to marry you—some day, you will remember that I never said I loved you. I thought that I should learn to love in time. And so I did—but not—not you."

"And who taught you the lesson that I failed to impart?" asked Percival, with the sneer in his voice which she knew and dreaded.

"Don't ask me," she said, painfully. "It is not fair to ask me that. I did not know until it was too late."

"Until he—whoever he was—asked you to marry him, I suppose? Well, when is the ceremony to take place? Do you expect me to dance at the wedding? Do you think I am going tamely to resign my rights? My God, Elizabeth, is it you who can treat me in this way? Are all women as false as you?"

He struck his foot fiercely against the ground, and walked away from her. When he came back he found her in the same position; white as a statue, with her hands clasped together upon her knee, and her eyes fixed upon the running water.

"Do you think that I am a stone," he said, violently, "that you tell me the story of your falseness so quietly, as if it were a tale that I should like to hear? Do you think that I feel nothing, or do you care so little what I feel? You had better have refused me outright at once than kept me dangling at your feet for a couple of years, only to throw me over at the last!"

"I have not thrown you over," she said, raising her blue-grey eyes steadily to his agitated face. "I wanted to tell you; that was all. If you like to marry me now, knowing the truth, you may do so."

"What!"

"I may have been false to you in heart," she said, the hot blood

tinting her cheeks with carnation as she spoke, "but I will not break my word."

"And what did your lover say to that?" he asked, roughly, as he stood before her. "Did he not say that you were as false to him as you were to me? Did he not say that he would come back again and again, and force you to be true, at least, to him? For that is what I should have done in his place."

"Then," Elizabeth said, with a touch of antagonism in her tones, "he was nobler than you."

"Oh, no doubt," said Percival, tossing aside his head. "No doubt he is a finer fellow in every way. Am I to have the pleasure of making his acquaintance?"

His scorn, his intolerance, were rousing her spirit at last. She spoke firmly, with a new light in her eyes, a new self-possession in her manner.

"You are unjust, Percival. I think that you do not understand what I mean to tell you. He accepted my decision, and I shall never see him again. I thought at first that I would not tell you, but let our engagement go on quietly; and then again I thought that it would be unfair to you not to tell you the whole truth. I leave it to you to say what we should do. I have no love to give you—but you knew that from the first. The difference now is that I—I love another."

Her voice sank almost to a whisper as she uttered the last few words, and she covered her face with her hands. Percival's brow cleared a little; the irony disappeared from his lips, the flash of scorn from his eye. He advanced to her side, and stood looking down at her for several minutes before he attempted any answer to her speech.

"You mean to say," he began, in a softer tone, "that you rejected this man because you had given your promise to me?"

"Yes."

"You sent him away?"

"Yes."

"And he knew the reason? Did he know that you loved him, Elizabeth?"

The answer was given reluctantly, after a long pause. "I do not know. I am afraid—he did."

Percival drew a short, impatient breath. "You must forgive me if I was violent just now, Elizabeth. This is very hard to bear."

"I dare not ask your pardon," she murmured, with her face still between her hands.

"Oh, my pardon? That will do you little good," he said, contemptuously. "The question is—what is to be done? I

suppose this man—this lover of yours—is within call, as it were, Elizabeth? You could summon him with your little finger? If I released you from this engagement to me, you could whistle him back to you next day?"

"Oh, no," she said, looking up at him wonderingly. "He is gone away from England. I do not know where he is."

"It is this man Stretton, then?" said Percival, quietly.

A sudden rush of colour to her face assured him that he had guessed the truth. "I always suspected him," he muttered.

"You had no need. He behaved as honourably as possibly. He did not know of my engagement to you."

"Honourably? A penniless adventurer making love to one of the richest women in Scotland!"

"You mistake, Percival. He did not know that I was rich."

"A likely story!"

"You insult him—and me," said Elizabeth, in a very low tone. "If you have no pity, have some respect—for him—if you have none for me." And then she burst into an agony of tears, such as he had never seen her shed before. But he was pitiless still. The wound was very deep: his pain very sharp and keen.

"Have you had any pity for me?" he said. "Why should I pity him? To my mind, he is the most enviable man on earth, because he has your love. Respect him, when he has stolen from me the thing that I value more than my life! You do not know what you say."

She still wept, and presently he sat down beside her and leaned his head on his hand, looking at her from out the shadow made by his bent fingers above his eyes.

"Let me understand matters clearly," he said. "You sent him away, and he has gone to America, never to return. Is that it? And you will marry me, although you do not love me, because you have promised to do so, if I ask you? What do you expect me to say?"

She shook her head. She could not speak.

"I am not generous," he went on deliberately. "You have known me long enough to be aware that I am a very selfish man. I will not give you up to Stretton. He is not the right husband for you. He is a man whom you picked up in the streets, without a character, without antecedents, with a history which he dares not tell. So much I gathered from my father. I say nothing about his behaviour in this case; he may have acted well, or he may have acted badly; I have no opinion to give. But you shall never be his wife."

Elizabeth's tears were dried as if by magic. She sat erect,

listening with set lips and startled eyes to the fierce energy of his tones.

"I accept your sacrifice," he said. "You will thank me in the end that I did so. No, I do not release you from your engagement, Elizabeth. You have said that you would keep your word, and I hold you to it."

He drew her to him with his arm, and kissed her cheek with passionate determination. She shrank away, but he would not let her go.

"No," he proceeded, "you are my promised wife, Elizabeth. I have no intention of giving you up for Stretton or anybody else. I love you more than ever now that I see how brave and honest you can be. We will have no more concealments. When we go back to the house we will tell all the world of our engagement. It was the secrecy that worked this mischief."

She wrenched herself away from him with a look of mingled pain and anger. "Percival!" she cried, "do you want to make me hate you?"

"I would rather have hate than indifference," he answered. "And whether you hate me or not, Elizabeth, you shall be my wife before the year is out. I shall not let you go."

CHAPTER XXVII.

PERCIVAL'S OWN WAY.

PERCIVAL had his way. He came back to the house looking stern and grim, but with a resolute determination to carry his point. In half-an-hour it was known throughout the whole household that Miss Murray was engaged to be married to young Mr. Heron, and that the marriage would probably take place before Christmas.

Kitty cast a frightened glance at Elizabeth's face when the announcement was made, but gathered little from its expression. A sort of dull apathy had come over the girl—a reaction, perhaps, from the excitement of feeling through which she had lately passed. It gave her no pain when Percival insisted upon demonstrations of affection which were very contrary to her former habits. She allowed him to hold her hand, to kiss her lips, to call her by endearing names, in a way that would ordinarily have roused her indignation. She seemed incapable of resistance to his will. And this passiveness was so unusual with her that it alarmed and irritated Percival by turns.

Anger rather than affection was the motive of his conduct. As he himself had said, he was rather a selfish man, and he would not willingly sacrifice his own happiness unless he was very

sure that hers depended upon the sacrifice. He was enraged with the man who had won Elizabeth's love, and believed him to be a scheming adventurer. Neither patience nor tolerance belonged to Percival's character; and although he loved Elizabeth, he was bitterly indignant with her, and not indisposed to punish her for her faithlessness by forcing her to submit to caresses which she neither liked nor returned. If he had any magnanimity in him he deliberately put it on one side; he knew that he was taking a revenge upon her for which she might never forgive him, which was neither delicate nor generous, but he told himself that he had been too much injured to show mercy. It was Elizabeth's own fault if he assumed the airs of a sultan with a favourite slave, instead of kneeling at her feet. So he argued with himself; and yet a little grain of conscience made him feel from time to time that he was wrong, and that he might live to repent what he was doing now.

"We will be married before Christmas, Elizabeth," he said one day, when he had been at Strathleckie nearly a week. He spoke in a tone of cool insistance.

"As you think best," she answered, sadly.

"Would you prefer a later date?"

"Oh, no," said Elizabeth, smiling a little. "It is all the same to me. "'If 'twere done at all, 'twere well done quickly,' you know."

"Do you mean that?'

"Yes.

"Then why delay it at all? Why not next week—next month, at latest? What is there to wait for?"

They were sitting in the little school-room, or study, as it was called, near the front door—the very room in which Elizabeth had talked with Brian on the night of his arrival at Strathleckie. The remembrance of that conversation prompted her reply.

"Oh, no," she said, in a tone of almost agonised entreaty. "Percival, have a little mercy. Not yet—not yet."

His face hardened: his keen eyes fixed themselves relentlessly upon her white face. He was sitting upon the sofa: she standing by the fireplace with her hands clasped tightly before her. For a minute he looked at her thus, and then he spoke.

"You said just now that it was all the same to you. May I ask what you mean?"

"There is no need to ask me," she said, resolutely, although her pale lips quivered. "You know what I mean. I will marry you before Christmas, if you like; but not with such—such indecent haste as you propose. Not this month, nor next."

"In December then?"

"Yes."

"You promise? Even if this man—this tutor—should come back?"

"I suppose I have given you a right to doubt me, Percival," she said. "But I have never broken my word—never! From the first, I only promised to try to love you; and, indeed, I tried."

"Oh, of course, I know that I am not a lovable individual," said Percival, throwing himself back on the cushions with a savage scowl.

She looked up quickly: there was a bitter word upon her tongue, but she refrained from uttering it. The struggle lasted for a moment only; then she went over to him, and laid her hand softly upon his arm.

"Percival, are you always going to be so hard upon me?" she said. "I know you do not easily forgive, and I have wronged you. Can I do more than be sorry for my wrong-doing? I was wrong to object to your wishes. I will marry you when you like: you shall decide everything for me now!"

His face had been gloomily averted, but he turned and looked at her as she said the last few words, and took both her hands in his.

"I'm not quite such a brute as you think me, Elizabeth," he answered, with some emotion in his voice. "I don't want to make you do what you find painful."

"That is nonsense," she said, more decidedly than he had heard her speak for many days. "The whole matter is very painful to both of us at present. The only alleviation——"

"Well, what is the only alleviation? Why do you hesitate?"

She lifted her serious, clear eyes to his face.

"I hesitated," she said, "because I did not feel sure whether I had the right to speak of it as an alleviation. I meant—the only thing that makes life bearable at all is the trying to do right; and, when one has failed in doing it, to get back to the right path as soon as possible, leaving the sin and misery behind."

He still held her hands, and he looked down at the slender wrists (where the blue veins showed so much more distinctly than they used to do) with something like a sigh.

"If one failure grieves you in this way, Elizabeth, what would you do if you had chosen a path from which you could not turn back, although you knew that it was wrong? There are many men and women whose lives are based upon what you would call, I suppose, wrong-doing."

There was little of his usual sneering emphasis in the words. His face had fallen into an expression of trouble and sadness

which it did not often wear; but there was so much less hardness in its lines than there had been of late that Elizabeth felt that she might answer him freely and frankly.

"I don't think there is any path of wrong-doing from which one might not turn back, Percival. And it seems to me that the worst misery one could go through would be the continuing in any such path; because the consciousness of wrong would spoil all the beauty of life and take the flavour out of every enjoyment. It would end, I think, by breaking one's heart altogether."

"A true woman's view," said Percival, starting up and releasing her hands, "but not one that is practicable in the world of men. I suppose you think you know one man, at least, who would come up to your ideal in that respect?"

"I know several; you amongst them," she replied. "I am sure you would not deliberately do a wicked, dishonourable action for the world."

"You have more faith in me than I deserve," he said, walking restlessly up and down the room. "I am not so sure—but of one thing I am quite sure, Elizabeth," and he came up to her and put his hands on her shoulders, "I am quite sure that you are the best and truest woman that ever lived, and I beg your pardon if I seemed for one moment to doubt you. Will you grant it to me, darling?"

For the first time since the beginning of the visit, she looked at him gratefully, and even affectionately.

"I have nothing to forgive you," she said. "If only I could forgive myself!" And then she burst into tears, and Percival forgot his ill-humour and his sense of wrong in trying to sooth her into calmness again.

This conversation made them both happier. Elizabeth lost her unnatural passiveness of demeanour, and looked more like her clear-headed, energetic self; and Percival was less exacting and overbearing than he had been during the past week. He went back to London with a strong conviction that time would give him Elizabeth's heart as well as her hand; and that she would learn to forget the unprincipled scoundrel—so Percival termed him—who had dared to aspire to her love.

The Herons were to return to London in November, and the purchase of Elizabeth's trousseau was postponed until then. But other preparations were immediately begun: there was a great talk of "settlements" and "entail" in the house; and Mr. Colquhoun had some very long and serious interviews with his fair client. It need hardly be stated that Mr. Colquhoun greatly objected to Miss Murray's marriage with her cousin,

and applied to him (in strict privacy) not a few of the adjectives which Percival had bestowed upon the tutor. But the lawyer was driven to admit that Mr. Percival Heron, poor though he might be, showed a very disinterested spirit when consulted upon money matters, and that he stood firm in his determination that Elizabeth's whole fortune should be settled upon herself. He declared also that he was not going to live upon his wife's money, and that he should continue to pursue his profession of journalism and literature in general after his marriage; but at this assertion Mr. Colquhoun shook his head.

"It shows a very independent spirit in ye, Mr. Heron," he said, when Percival announced his resolve in a somewhat lordly manner; "but I think that in six months' time after the marriage, ye'll just agree with me that your determination was one that could not be entirely carried out.

"I usually do carry out my determinations, Mr. Colquhoun," said Percival, hotly.

"No doubt, no doubt. It's a determination that reflects credit upon ye, Mr. Heron. Ye'll observe that I'm not saying a word against your determination," replied Mr. Colquhoun, warily, but with emphasis. "It's highly creditable both to Miss Murray and to yourself."

And although Percival felt himself insulted, he could not well say more.

The continuation of his connection with the daily press was the proof which he intended to offer to the world of his disinterestedness in marrying Elizabeth Murray. He disliked the thought of her wealth, but he was of too robust a nature, in spite of his sensitiveness on many points, to refuse to marry a woman simply because she was richer than himself. In fact, that is a piece of Quixotism not often practised, and though Percival would perhaps have been capable of refusing to make an offer of marriage to Elizabeth after she had come into her fortune, he was not disposed to withdraw that offer because it had turned out a more advantageous one for himself than he had expected. It is only fair to say that he did not hold Elizabeth to her word on account of her wealth: he never once thought of it in that interview with her on the river-bank. Selfish as he might be in some things, he was liberal and generous to a fault when money was in the question.

It was Mr. Colquhoun who told Mrs. Luttrell of Miss Murray's engagement. He was amazed at the look of anger and disappointment that crossed her face. "Ay!" she said, bitterly, "I am too late, as I always am. This will be a sore blow to Hugo."

"Hugo!" said the old lawyer. "Was he after Miss Murray

too? Not a bad notion, either. It would have been a good thing to get the property back to the Luttrells. He could have called himself Murray-Luttrell then."

"Too late for that," said Mrs. Luttrell, grimly. "Well, he shall have Netherglen."

"Are you quite decided in your mind on that point?" queried Mr. Colquhoun.

"Quite so. I'll give you my instructions about the will as soon as you like."

"Take time! take time!" said the lawyer.

"I have taken time. I have thought the matter over in every light, and I am quite convinced that what I possess ought to go to Hugo. There is no other Luttrell to take Netherglen—and to a Luttrell Netherglen must go."

"I should have thought that you would like better to leave it to Miss Murray, who is of your own father's blood," said Mr. Colquhoun, cautiously. "She is your second cousin, ye'll remember; and a good girl into the bargain."

"A good girl she may be, and a handsome one; and I would gladly have seen her the mistress of Netherglen if she were Hugo's wife; but Netherglen was never mine, it was my husband's, and though it came to me at his death, it shall stay in the Luttrell family, as he meant it to do. Elizabeth Murray has the Strathleckie property; that ought to be enough for her, especially as she is going to marry a penniless cousin, who will perhaps make ducks and drakes of it all."

"Hugo's a fortunate lad," said Mr. Colquhoun, drily, as he seated himself at a writing-table, in order to take Mrs. Luttrell's instructions. "I hope he may be worthy of his good luck."

Hugo did not seem to consider himself very fortunate when he heard the news of Miss Murray's approaching marriage. He looked thoroughly disconcerted. Mrs. Luttrell was inclined to think that his affections had been engaged more deeply than she knew, and in her hard, unemotional way, tried to express some sympathy with him in his loss. It was not a matter of the affections with Hugo, however, but his purse. His money affairs were much embarrassed: he was beginning to calculate the amount that he could wring out of Mrs. Luttrell, and, if she failed him, he had made up his mind to marry Elizabeth.

"Heron!" he exclaimed, in a tone of surprise and disgust, "I don't believe she cares a rap for Heron."

"How can you tell?" said his aunt.

Hugo looked at her, looked down, and said nothing.

"If you think she liked you better than Mr. Heron," said

Mrs. Luttrell, in a meditative tone, "something might yet be done to change the course of affairs."

"No, no," said Hugo, hastily. "Dear Aunt Margaret, you are too kind. No, if she is happy, it is all I ask. I will go to Strathleckie this afternoon; perhaps I can then judge better."

"I don't want you to do anything dishonourable," said his aunt, "but, if Elizabeth likes you best, Hugo, I could speak to Mr. Heron—the father, I mean—and ascertain whether the engagement is absolutely irrevocable. I should like to see you happy as well as Elizabeth Murray."

Hugo sighed, kissed his aunt's hand, and departed—not to see Elizabeth, but Kitty Heron. He felt that if his money difficulties could only be settled, he was well out of that proposed marriage with Elizabeth; but then money difficulties were not easily settled when one had no money. In the meantime, he was free to make love to Kitty.

Percival spent two or three busy weeks in London, and found that hard work was the best specific for the low spirits from which he had suffered during his stay in Scotland. He heard regularly from Elizabeth, and her letters, though not long, and somewhat coldly expressed, gave him complete satisfaction. He noticed with some surprise that she spoke a good deal of Hugo Luttrell; he seemed to be always with them, and the distant cousinship existing between him and Elizabeth had been made the pretext for a good deal of apparent familiarity. He was "Hugo" now to the whole family; he had been "Mr. Luttrell" only when Percival left Strathleckie.

He was sitting alone in his "den," as he nicknamed it, late in the afternoon of a November day, when a low knock at the door made itself faintly heard. Percival was smoking; having come in cold and tired, he had wheeled an arm-chair in front of the fire, and was sitting with his feet on the bars of the grate, whereby a faint odour of singed leather was gradually mingling with the fumes of the very strong tobacco that he loved. His green shaded lamp stood on a small table beside him, throwing its light full upon the pages of the French novel that he had taken up to read (it was "Spiridion" and he was reading it for about the twentieth time); books and newspapers, as usual, strewed the floor, the tables, and the chairs; well-filled bookshelves lined three of the walls; the only ornaments were the photographs of two or three actors and actresses, some political caricatures pinned to the walls, a couple of foils and boxing-gloves, and on the mantelpiece a choice collection of pipes. The atmosphere was thick, the aspect of the furniture dusty: Percival Heron's own appearance was not at that moment cal-

culated to inspire admiration. His hair was absolutely dishevelled; truth compels us to admit that he had not shaved that day, and that his chin was consequently of a blue-black colour and bristly surface, which could not be called attractive: his clothes were shabby to the last degree, frayed at the cuffs, and very shiny on the shoulders. Heron was a poor man, and had a good deal of the Bohemian in his constitution: hence came a certain contempt for appearances, which sometimes offended his friend Vivian, as well as a real inability to spend money on clothes and furniture without getting into debt. And Percival, extravagant as he sometimes seemed, was never in debt: he had seen too much of it in his father's house not to be alive to its inconveniences, and he had had the moral courage to keep a resolution made in early boyhood, that he would never owe money to any man. Hence came the shabbiness—and also, perhaps, some of the arrogance—of which his friends complained.

Owing partly therefore to the shabbiness, partly to the untidiness, partly to the very comfort of the slightly overheated room, the visitor who entered it did not form a very high opinion of its occupant. Percival's frown, and momentary stare of astonishment, were, perhaps, enough to disconcert a person not already very sure of his reception.

"Am I dreaming?" muttered Heron to himself, as he cast the book to the ground, and rose to his feet. "One would think that George Sand's visionary young monk had walked straight out of the book into my room. Begging, I suppose. Good evening. You have called on behalf of some charity, I suppose? Come nearer to the fire; it is a cold night."

The stranger—a young man in a black cassock—bowed courteously, and seated himself in the chair that Percival pointed out. He then spoke in English, but with a foreign accent, which did not sound unpleasantly in Heron's ears.

"I have not come on behalf of any charity," he said, "but I come in the interests of justice."

"The same thing, I suppose, in the long run," Percival remarked to himself. "But what a fine face the beggar has! He's been ill lately, or else he is half-starved—shall I give him some whisky and a pipe? I suppose he would feel insulted!"

While he made these reflections, he replied politely that he was always pleased to serve the interests of justice, offered his guest a glass of wine (chiefly because he looked so thin and pale)—an offer which was smilingly rejected—then crossed his legs, looked up to the ceiling, and awaited in silent resignation the pitiful story which he was sure that this young monk had come to tell.

But, after a troubled glance at Mr. Heron's face, (which had a

peculiarly reckless and defiant expression by reason of the tossed hair, the habitual frown and the bristles on his chin), the visitor began to speak in a very different strain from the one which Percival had expected.

"I have come," he said, "on affairs which concern yourself and your family; and, therefore, I must heartily beg your pardon if I appear to you an insolent intruder, speaking of matters which it does not concern me to know."

His formal English sentences were correct enough, but seemed to be constructed with some difficulty. Percival's eyes came down from the ceiling and rested upon his thin, pale face with lazy curiosity.

"I should not have thought that my affairs would be particularly interesting to you," he said.

"But there you are wrong, they interest me very much," said the young man, with much vivacity. His dark eyes glowed like coals of fire as he proceeded. "There is scarcely anyone whose fortunes are of so much significance to me."

"I am much obliged to you," murmured Percival, with lifted eyebrows; "but I hardly understand——"

"You will understand quite soon enough, Mr. Heron," said the visitor, quietly. "I have news for you that may not be agreeable. I believe that you have a cousin, a Miss Murray, who lately succeeded to a great fortune."

"Yes, but what has that to do with you, if you please?" demanded Heron, his amiability vanishing into space.

The stranger lifted his hand.

"Allow me one moment. She inherited this fortune on the death of a Mr. Brian Luttrell, I think?"

"Exactly—but what——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Heron. I come to my piece of news at last Miss Murray has no right to the property which she is enjoying. Mr. Brian Luttrell is alive!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A REVELATION.

PERCIVAL started from his chair. His first exclamation was a rather profane one, for which the monk immediately reproved him. He did not take much notice of the reproof: he stared hard at the young man for a minute or two, unconsciously repeated the objectionable expression, and then took one or two turns up and down the room. After which he came to a stand, still, thrust his hands into his pockets, and allowed his features to relax into a sardonically-triumphant smile.

"You couldn't tell me a thing which I should be better pleased to hear," he said. "But I don't believe it's true."

This was rude, but the visitor was not disconcerted. He looked at Percival's masterful face with interest, and a little suspicion, and answered quietly :—

"I do not know exactly what evidence will satisfy you, sir. Of course, you will require evidence. I, myself, Bernardino Vasari of San Stefano, can testify that I saw Brian Luttrell in our monastery on the 27th day of November, some days after his reputed death. I can account for all his time after that date, and I can tell you where he is to be found at present. His cousin, Hugo Luttrell, has already recognised him, and, although he is much changed, I fancy that there would be small doubt about his identification."

"But why, in Heaven's name, did he allow himself to be thought dead?" cried Percival.

"You know, probably, the circumstances attending his brother's death?" said Dino, gently. "These, and a cruel letter from Mrs. Luttrell, made him resolve to take advantage of an accident in which his companions were killed. He made his way to a little inn on the southern side of the Alps, and thence to our monastery, where I recognised him as the gentleman whom I had previously seen travelling in Germany. I had had some conversation with him, and he had interested me—I remembered him well."

"Did he give his name as Brian Luttrell then?"

"I accosted him by it, and he begged me at once not to do so, but to give him another name."

"What name?"

"I will tell you the name presently, Mr. Heron. He remained in the monastery for some months: first ill of a fever on the brain, then, after his recovery, as a teacher to our young pupils. When he grew stronger he became tired of our peaceful life; he left the monastery and wandered from place to place in Italy. But he had no money: he began to think of work. He was learned: he could teach: he thought that he might be a tutor. Shall I go on?"

"Good God!" said Percival, below his breath. He had actually turned pale, and was biting his moustache savagely. "Go on, sir!" he thundered, looking at Dino from beneath his knitted brows. "Tell me the rest as quickly as you can."

"He met with an English family," Dino continued, watching with keen interest the effect of his words. "They were kind to him: they took him, without character, without recommendations, and allowed him to teach their children. He did not know

who they were: he thought that they were rich people, and that the young lady who was so dutiful to them, and cared so tenderly for their children, was poor like himself, a dependent like himself. He dared, therefore——"

"He lies and you lie!" Percival burst out, furiously. "How dare you come to me with a tale of this sort? He must have known! It was simply a base deception in order to get back his estate. If I had him here——"

"If you had him here you would listen to him, Mr. Heron," said Dino, in a perfectly unmoved voice, "as you will listen to me when the first shock of your surprise is over."

"Your garb, I suppose, protects you," said Percival, sharply. "Else I would throw you out of the window to join your accomplice outside. I daresay he is there. I don't believe a word of your story. May I trouble you to go?"

"This conduct is unworthy of you, sir," said Dino. "Brian Luttrell's identity will not be disproved by bluster. There is not the least doubt about it. Mr. Brian Luttrell is alive and has been teaching in your father's family for the last few months under the name of John Stretton."

"Then he is a scoundrel," said Percival. He threw himself into his chair again, with his feet stretched out before him, and his hands still thrust deep into his trousers' pockets. His face was white with rage. "I always thought that he was a rogue; and, if this story is true, he has proved himself one."

"How?" said Dino, quietly. "By living in poverty when he might have been rich? By allowing others to take what was legally his own, because he had a scruple about his moral right to it? If you knew all Brian Luttrell's story you would know that his only fault has been that of over-conscientiousness, over-scrupulousness. But you do not know the story, perhaps you never will, and, therefore, you cannot judge."

"I do not want to judge. I have nothing to do with Mr. Stretton and his story," said Percival.

"I will tell you——"

"I will not hear. You are impostors, the pair of you."

Dino's eyes flashed and his lips compressed themselves. His face, thin from his late illness, assumed a wonderful sternness of expression.

"This is folly," he said, with a cold serenity of tone which impressed Percival in spite of himself. "You will have to hear part of his story sooner or later, Mr. Heron; for your own sake, for Miss Murray's sake, you had better hear it now."

"Look here, my good man," said Percival, sitting up, and regarding his visitor with contemptuous disgust, "don't go

bringing Miss Murray's name into this business, for, if you do, I'll call a policeman and give you in charge for trying to extort money on false pretences, and you may thank your priest's dress, or whatever it is, that I don't kick you out of the house. Do you hear?"

"Sir," said Dino, mildly, but with great dignity, "have I asked you for a single penny?"

Heron looked at him as if he would like to carry out the latter part of his threat, but the young man was so frail, so thin, so feeble, that he felt suddenly ashamed of having threatened him. He rose, planted his back firmly against the mantelpiece, and pointed significantly to the door. "Go!" he said, briefly. "And don't come back."

"If I go," said Dino, rising from his chair, "I shall take the express train to Scotland at eight o'clock to-night, and I shall see Miss Murray to-morrow morning."

The shot told. A sort of quiver passed over Percival's set face. He muttered an angry ejaculation. "I'll see you d——d first," he said. "You'll do nothing of the kind."

"Then will you hear my story?"

Heron paused. He could have ground his teeth with fury; but he was quite alive to the difficulties of the situation. If this young monk went with his story to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth believed it, what would become of her fidelity to him? With his habitual cynicism, he told himself that no woman would keep her word, if by doing so she lost a fortune and a lover both. He must hear this story, if only to prevent its being told to her.

"Well," he said at last, taking his pipe from the mantelshelf, "I'll listen. Be so good as to make your story short. I have no time to waste." And then he rammed the tobacco into the bowl with his thumb in a suggestively decisive manner, lighted it, and proceeded to puff at his pipe with a sort of savage vigour. He sent out great clouds of smoke, which speedily filled the air and rendered speaking difficult to Dino, whose lungs had become delicate in consequence of his wound. But Percival was rather pleased than otherwise to inconvenience him.

"There are several reasons," the young man began, "why Brian Luttrell wished to be thought dead. He had killed his brother by accident, and Mrs. Luttrell thought that there had been malice as well as carelessness in the deed. That was one reason. His mother's harshness preyed upon his mind and drove him almost to melancholy madness. Mrs. Luttrell made another statement, and made it in a way that convinced him that she had reasons for making it——"

"Can't you cut it short?" said Percival. "It's all very interesting, no doubt; but as I don't care a hang what Brian

Luttrell said, or thought, or did, I should prefer to have as little of it as possible.'

"I am sorry to inconvenience you, but I must tell my story in my own way," answered Dino. The flash of his eye and the increased colour in his cheek showed that Heron's words irritated him, but his voice was carefully calm and cool. "Mrs. Luttrell's statement was this: that Brian Luttrell was not her son at all. I have in my possession the letter that she wrote to him on the subject, assuring him confidently that he was the child of her Italian nurse, Vincenza Vasari, and that her own child had died in infancy, and was buried in the churchyard of San Stefano. Here is the letter, if you like to assure yourself that what I have said is true."

Percival made a satirical little bow of refusal. But a look of attention had come into his eyes.

"Brian believed this story absolutely, although he had then no proof of its truth," continued Dino. "She told him that the Vasari family lived at San Stefano——"

"Vasari! Relations of your own, I presume," interposed Percival, with ironical politeness.

"And to San Stefano, therefore, he was making his way when the accident on the mountain occurred," said Dino, utterly disregarding the interruption. "There were inquiries made about him at San Stefano soon after the news of his supposed death arrived in England, for Mrs. Luttrell guessed that he would go thither if he were still living; but he had not then appeared at the monastery. He did not arrive at San Stefano, as I said before, until a fortnight after the date of the accident; he had been ill, and was footsore and weary. When he recovered from the brain-fever which prostrated him as soon as he reached the monastery, he told his whole story to the Prior, Padre Cristoforo of San Stefano, a man whose character is far beyond suspicion. I have also Padre Cristoforo's statement, if you would like to see it."

Percival shook his head. But his pipe had gone out; he was listening now with interest.

"As it happened," the narrator went on, "Padre Cristoforo was already interested in the matter, because the mother of Mrs. Luttrell's nurse, Vincenza, had, before her death, confided to him her suspicions, and those of Vincenza's husband concerning the child that she had nursed. There was a child living in the village of San Stefano, a child who had been brought up as Vincenza's child, but Vincenza had told her this boy was the true Brian Luttrell, and that her son had been taken back to Scotland as Mrs. Luttrell's child."

"I see your drift now," remarked Percival, quietly re-lighting his pipe. "Where is this Italian Brian Luttrell to be found?"

"Need I tell you? Should I come hear with this story if I were not the man?"

He asked the question almost sadly, but with a simplicity of manner which showed him to be free from any desire to produce any theatrical effect. He waited for a moment, looking steadily at Percival, whose darkening brow and kindling eyes displayed rapidly-rising anger.

"I was called Dino Vasari at San Stefano," he continued, "but I believe that my rightful name is Brian Luttrell, and that Vincenza Vasari changed the children during an illness of Mrs. Luttrell's."

"And that, therefore," said Percival, slowly, "you are the owner of the Strathleckie property—or, as it is generally called, the Luttrell property—now possessed by Miss Murray?"

Dino bowed his head.

Percival puffed away at his pipe for a minute or two, and surveyed him from head to foot with angry, contemptuous eyes. The only thing that prevented him from letting loose a storm of rage upon Dino's head was the young man's air of grave simplicity and good faith. He did not look like an intentional impostor, such as Percival Heron would gladly have believed him to be.

"Do you know," inquired Heron, after a momentary pause, "what the penalties are for attempting to extort money, or for passing yourself off under a false name in order to get property? Did you ever hear of the Claimant and Portland Prison? I would advise you to acquaint yourself with these details before you come to me again. You may be more fool than knave; but you may carry your foolery or your knavery elsewhere."

Dino smiled.

"You had better hear the rest of my story before you indulge in these idle threats, Mr. Heron. I know perfectly well what I am doing."

There was a tone of lofty assurance, almost of superiority, in Dino's calm voice, which galled Percival, because he felt that it had the power of subduing him a little. Before he had thought of a rejoinder, the young Benedictine resumed his story.

"You will say rightly enough that these were not proofs. So Padre Cristoforo said when he kept me in the monastery until I came to years of discretion. So he told Brian Luttrell when he came to San Stefano. But since that day new witnesses have arisen. Vincenza Vasari was not dead: she had only disappeared for a time. She is now found, and she is prepared to swear to

the truth of the story that I have told you. Mrs. Luttrell's suspicions, the statement made by Vincenza's husband and mother, the confession of another woman who was Vincenza's accomplice, all form corroborative evidence which will, I think, be quite sufficient to prove the case. So, at least, Messrs. Brett and Grattan assure me, and they have gone carefully into the matter, and have the original papers in their possession."

"Brett and Grattan!" repeated Percival. He knew the names. "Do you say that Brett and Grattan have taken it up? You must have managed matters cleverly: Brett and Grattan are a respectable firm."

"You are at liberty, of course, to question them. You may, perhaps, credit their statement."

"I will certainly go to them and expose this imposture," said Percival, haughtily. "I suppose you have no objection," with a hardly-concealed sneer, "to go with me to them at once?"

"Not in the least. I am quite ready."

Percival was rather staggered by his willingness to accompany him. He laid down his pipe, which he had been holding mechanically for some time in his hand, and made a step towards the door. But as he reached it Dino spoke again.

"I wish, Mr. Heron, that before you go to these lawyers you would listen to me a little longer. If for a moment or two you would divest yourself of your suspicions, if you would for a moment or two assume (only for the sake of argument) the truth of my story, I could tell you then why I came. As yet, I have scarcely approached the object of my errand."

"Money, I suppose!" said Percival. "Truth will out, sooner or later."

"Mr. Heron," said Dino, "are we to approach this subject as gentlemen or not? When I ask you for money, you will be at liberty to insult me, not before."

Again that tone of quiet superiority! Percival broke out angrily:—

"I will listen to nothing more from you. If you like to go with me to Brett and Grattan, we will go now; if not, you are a liar and an impostor, and I shall be happy to kick you out into the street."

Dino raised his head; a quick, involuntary movement ran through his frame, as if it thrilled with anger at the insulting words. Then his head sank; he quietly folded his arms across his breast, and stood as he used to stand when awaiting an order or an admonition from the Prior—tranquil, submissive, silent, but neither ill-humoured nor depressed. The very silence and submission enraged Percival the more.

"If you were of Scotch or English blood," he said, sharply, pausing as he crossed the room to look over his shoulder at the motionless figure in the black robe, with folded arms and bent head, "you would resent the words I have hastily used. That you don't do so is proof positive to my mind that you are no Luttrell."

"If I am a Luttrell, I trust that I am a Christian, too," said Dino, tranquilly. "It is a monk's duty—a monk's privilege—to bear insult."

"Detestable hypocrisy!" growled Percival to himself, as he stepped to the door and ostentatiously locked it, putting the key into his pocket, before he went into the adjoining bed-room to change his coat. "We'll soon see what Brett and Grattan say to him. Confound the fellow! Who would think that that smooth saintly face covered so much insolence! I should like to give him a good hiding. I should, indeed."

He returned to the sitting-room, unlocked the door, and ordered a servant to fetch a hansom-cab. Then he occupied himself by setting some of the books straight on the shelves, humming a tune to himself meanwhile, as if nobody else were in the room."

"Mr. Heron," Dino said at last, "I came to propose a compromise. Will you listen to it yet?"

"No," said Percival, drily. "I'll listen to nothing until I have seen Brett. If your case is as good as you declare it is, he will convince me; and then you can talk about compromises. I'm not in the humour for compromises just now."

He noticed that Dino's eyes were fixed earnestly upon something on his writing-table. He drew near enough to see that it was a cabinet photograph of Elizabeth Murray in a brass frame —a likeness which had just been taken, and which was considered remarkably good. The head and shoulders only were seen: the stately pose of the head, the slightly upturned profile, the rippling mass of hair resting on the fine shoulders, round which a shawl had been loosely draped—these constituted the chief points of a portrait which some people said was "idealised," but which, in the opinion of the Herons, only showed Elizabeth at her best. Percival coolly took up the photograph and marched away with it to another table, on which he laid it face downwards. He did not choose to have the Italian impostor scrutinising Elizabeth Murray's face. Dino understood the action, and liked him for it better than he had done as yet.

The drive to Messrs. Brett and Grattan's office was accomplished in perfect silence. The office was just closing,

but Mr. Brett—the partner with whom Percival happened to be acquainted—was there, and received the visitors very civilly.

"You seem to know this—this gentleman, Mr. Brett?" began Percival, somewhat stiffly.

"I think I have that pleasure," said Mr. Brett, who was a big, red-faced, genial-looking man, as much unlike the typical lawyer of the novel and the stage, as a fox-hunting squire would have been. But Mr. Brett's reputation was assured. "I think I have that pleasure," he repeated, rubbing his hands, and looking as though he was enjoying the interview very much. "I have seen him before once or twice, have I not? eh, Mr.—er—Mr.——"

"Ah, that is just the point," said Percival. "Will you have the goodness to tell me the name of this—this person?"

Mr. Brett stopped rubbing his hands, and looked from Dino to Percival, and back again to Dino. The look said plainly enough, "What shall I tell him? How much does he know?"

"I wish to have no secrets from Mr. Heron," said Dino, simply. "He is the gentleman who is going to marry Miss Elizabeth Murray, and, of course, he is interested in the matter."

"Ah, of course, of course. I don't know that you ought to have brought him here," said Mr. Brett, shaking his head waggishly at Dino. "Against rules, you know: against custom: against precedent. But I believe you want to arrange matters pleasantly amongst yourselves. Well, Mr. Heron, I don't often like to commit myself to a statement, but, under the circumstances, I have no hesitation in saying that I believe this gentleman now before you, who called himself Vasari in Italy, is in reality——"

"Well?" said Percival, feeling his heart sink within him and speaking more impatiently than usual in consequence, "Well, Mr. Brett?"

"Is in reality," said Mr. Brett, with great deliberation and emphasis, "the second son of Edward and Margaret Luttrell, stolen from them in infancy—Brian Luttrell."

CHAPTER XXIX.

DINO'S PROPOSITION.

DINO turned away. He would not see the discomfiture plainly depicted upon Percival's face. Mr. Brett smiled pleasantly, and rubbed his hands.

"I see that it's a shock to you, Mr. Heron," he said. "Well, we can understand that. It's natural. Of course you thought

Miss Murray a rich woman, as we all did, and it is a little disappointing——"

"Your remarks are offensive, sir, most offensive," said Percival, whose ire was thoroughly roused by this address. "I will bid you and your client good-evening. I have no more to say."

He made for the door, but Dino interposed.

"It is my turn now, I think, Mr. Heron. You insisted upon my coming here: I must insist now upon your seeing the documents I have to show you, and hearing what I have to say." And with a sharp click he turned the key in the lock, and stood with his back against the door.

"Tut, tut, tut!" said Mr. Brett; "there is no need to lock the door, no need of violence, Mr. Luttrell." In spite of himself, Percival started when he heard that name applied to the young monk before him. "Let the matter be settled amicably, by all means. You come from the young lady; you have authority to act for her, have you, Mr. Heron?"

"No," said Percival, sullenly. "She knows nothing about it."

"This is an informal interview," said Dino. "Mr. Heron refused to believe that you had undertaken my case, Mr. Brett, until he heard the fact from your own lips. I trust that he is now satisfied on that point, at any rate."

"Mr. Brett is an old acquaintance of mine. I have no reason to doubt his sincerity," said Percival, shortly and stiffly.

If Dino had hoped for anything like an apology, he was much mistaken. Percival's temper was rampant still.

"Then," said Dino, quitting the door, with the key in his hand, "we may as well proceed to look at those papers of mine, Mr. Brett. There can be no objection to Mr. Heron's seeing them, I suppose?"

The lawyer made some objections, but ended by producing from a black box, a bundle of papers, amongst which were the signed and witnessed confessions of Vincenza Vasari and a woman named Rosa Naldi, who had helped in the exchange of the children. Mr. Brett would not allow these papers to go out of his own hands, but he showed them to Percival, expounded their contents, and made comments upon the evidence, remarking amongst other things that Vincenza Vasari herself was expected in England in a week or two, Padre Cristoforo having taken charge of her, and undertaken to produce her at the fitting time.

"The evidence seems to be very conclusive," said Mr. Brett, with a pleasant smile. "In fact, Miss Murray has no case at all,

and I dare say her legal adviser will know what advice to give her, Mr. Heron. Is there any question that you would like to ask?"

"No," said Percival, rising from his chair and glancing at Dino, who had stood by without speaking, throughout the lawyer's exposition of the papers. Then, very ungraciously: "I suppose I owe this gentleman in ecclesiastical attire—I hardly know what to call him—some sort of apology. I see that I was mistaken in what I said."

"My dear sir, I am sure Mr. Luttrell will make allowance for words spoken in the heat of the moment. No doubt it was a shock to you," said Mr. Brett, with ready sympathy, for which Percival hated him in his heart. His brow contracted, and he might have said something uncivil had Dino not come forward with a few quiet words, which diverted him from his purpose.

"If Mr. Heron thinks that he was mistaken," he said, "he will not refuse now to hear what I wished to say before we left his house. It will be simple justice to listen to me."

"Very well," answered Percival, frowning and looking down. "I will listen."

"Could we, for a few moments only, have a private room?" said Dino to Mr. Brett, with some embarrassment.

"You won't want me again?" said that cheerful gentleman, locking his desk. "Then, if you won't think me uncivil, I'll leave you altogether. My clerk is in the outer room, if you require him. I have a dinner engagement at eight o'clock which I should like to keep. Good-bye, Mr. Heron; sorry for your disappointment. Good-bye, Mr. Luttrell; I wish you wouldn't don that monkish dress of yours. It makes you look so un-English, you know. And, after all, you are not a monk, and never will be."

"Do not be too sure of that," said Dino, smiling.

Mr. Brett departed, and the two young men were left together. Percival was standing, vexation and impatience visible in every line of his handsome features. He gave his shoulders a shrug as the door closed behind Mr. Brett, and turned to the fire.

"And now, Mr. Heron," said Dino, "will you listen to my proposition?" He spoke in Italian, not English, and Percival replied in the same language.

"I have said I would listen."

"It refers to Brian Luttrell—the man who has borne that name so long that I think he should still be called by it."

"Ah! You have proved to me that Mr. Brett believes your story, and you have shown me that your case is a plausible one;

but you have not proved to me that the man Stretton is identical with Brian Luttrell."

"It is not necessary that that should be proved just now. It can be proved; but we will pass over that point, if you please. I am sorry that what I have to say trenches somewhat on your private and personal affairs, Mr. Heron. I can only entreat your patience for a little time. Your marriage with Miss Murray——"

"Need that be dragged into the discussion?"

"It is exactly the point on which I wish to speak."

"Indeed." Percival pulled the lawyer's arm-chair towards him, seated himself, and pulled his moustache. "I understand. You are Mr. Stretton's emissary!"

"His emissary! No." The denial was sharply spoken. It was with a softening touch of emotion that Dino added—"I doubt whether he will easily forgive me. I have betrayed him. He does not dream that I would tell his secret."

"Are you friendly with him, then?"

"We are as brothers."

"Where is he?"

"In London."

"Not gone to America then?"

"Not yet. He starts in a few days, if not delayed. I am trying to keep him back."

"I knew that his pretence of going was a lie!" muttered Percival. "Of course, he never intended to leave the country!"

"Pardon me," said Dino, who had heard more than was quite meant for his ears. "The word 'lie' should never be uttered in connection with any of Brian's words or actions. He is the soul of honour."

Percival sneered bitterly. "As is shown——" he began, and then stopped short. But Dino understood.

"As is shown," he said, steadily, "by the fact that when he learnt, almost in the same moment, that Miss Murray was the person who had inherited his property, and that she was promised in marriage to yourself, he left the house in which she lived, and resolved to see her face no more. Was there no sense of honour shown in this? For he loved her as his own soul."

"Upon my word," explained Percival, with unconcealed annoyance, "you seem to know a great deal about Miss Murray's affairs and mine, Mr.—Mr.—Vasari. I am flattered by the interest they excite; but I don't see exactly what good is to come of it. I knew of Mr. Stretton's proposal long ago: a very insolent one, I considered it."

"Let me ask you a plain question, Mr. Heron. You love Miss Murray, do you not?"

"If I do, said Heron, haughtily, "it is not a question that I am disposed to answer at present."

"You love Miss Murray," said Dino, as if the question had been answered in the affirmative, "and there is nothing on earth so dear to me as my friend Brian Luttrell. It may seem strange to you that it should be so; but it is true. I have no wish to take his place in Scotland——"

"Then what are you doing in Mr. Brett's office?" asked Percival, bluntly.

For the first time Dino showed some embarrassment.

"I have been to blame," he said, hanging his head. "I was forced into this position—by others; and I had not the strength to free myself. But I will not wrong Brian any longer."

"If your story is proved, it will not be wronging Brian or anybody else to claim your rights. Take the Luttrell property, by all means, if it belongs to you. We shall do very well without it."

"Yes," said Dino, almost in a whisper, "you will do very well without it, if you are sure that she loves you."

Percival sat erect in his chair and looked Dino in the face with an expression which, for the first time, was devoid of scorn or anger. It was almost one of dread; it was certainly the look of one who prepares himself to receive a shock.

"What have you to tell me?" he said, in an unusually quiet voice. "Is she deceiving me? Is she corresponding with him? Have they made you their confidant?"

"No, no," cried Dino, earnestly. "How can you think so of a woman with a face like hers, of a man with a soul like Brian's? Even he has told me little; but he has told me more than he knows—and I have guessed the rest. If I had not known before, your face would have told me all."

"Tricked!" said Percival, falling back in his chair with a gesture of disgust. "I might have known as much. Well, sir, you are wrong. And Miss Murray's feelings are not to be canvassed in this way."

"You are right," said Dino; "we will not speak of her. We will speak of Brian, of my friend. He is not happy. He is very brave, but he is unhappy, too. Are we to rob him of both the things which might make his happiness? Are you to marry the woman that he loves, and am I to take to myself his inheritance?"

"Hardly to be called his inheritance, I think," said Percival, in a parenthetic way, "if he was the child of one Vincenza Vasari, and not of the Luttrells."

"I have my proposals to make," said Dino again lowering his voice. A nervous flush crept up to his forehead: his lips twitched

behind the thin fingers with which he had partly covered them: the fingers trembled, too. Percival noted these signs of emotion without seeming to do so: he waited with some curiosity for the proposition. It startled him when it came. "I have been thinking that it would be better," said Dino, so simply and naturally that one would never have supposed that he was indicating a path of stern self-sacrifice, "if I were to withdraw all my claims to the estate, and you to relinquish Miss Murray's hand to Brian, then things would fall into their proper places, and he would not go to America."

Percival stared at him for a full minute before he seemed quite to understand all that was implied in this proposal; then he burst into a fit of scornful laughter.

"This is too absurd!" he cried. "Am I to give her up tamely because Mr. Brian Luttrell, as you call him, wishes to marry her? I am not so anxious to secure Mr. Brian Luttrell's happiness."

"But you wish to secure Miss Murray's, do you not?"

Percival became suddenly silent. Dino went on persuasively.

"I care little for the money and the lands which they say would be mine. My greatest wish in life is to become a monk. That is why I put on the gown that I used to wear, although I have taken no vows upon me yet, but I came to you in the spirit of one to whom earthly things are dead. Let me give up this estate to Brian, and make him happy with the woman that he loves. When he is married to Elizabeth you shall never see my face again."

"This is your proposition?" said Percival, after a little pause.

"Yes."

"If I give up Elizabeth"—he forgot that he had not meant to call her by her Christian name in Dino Vasari's presence—"you will give up your claim to the property?"

"Yes."

"And if I refuse, what will you do?"

"Fight the matter out by the help of the lawyers," said Dino, with an irrepressible flash of his dark eyes. And then there was another pause, during which Percival knitted his brows and gazed into the fire, and Dino never took his eyes from the other's face.

"Well, I refuse," said Percival at last, getting up and walking about the room, with an air of being more angry than he really was. "I will have none of your crooked Italian ways. Fair play is the best way of managing this matter. I refuse to carry out my share of this 'amicable arrangement,' as Brett would call it. Let us fight it out. Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost."

The last sentence was an English one.

"But what satisfaction will the fight give to anybody?" said Dino, earnestly. "For myself—I may gain the estate—I probably shall do so—and what use shall I make of it? I might give it, perhaps, to Brian, but what pleasure would it be to him if she married you? Miss Murray will be left in poverty."

"And do you think she will care for that? Do you think I should care?"

"Money is a good thing: it is not well to despise it," said Dino. "Think what you are doing. If you refuse my proposition you deprive Miss Murray of her estate, and—I leave you to decide whether you deprive her of her happiness."

"Miss Murray can refuse me if she chooses," said Percival, shortly. "I should be a great fool if I handed her over at your recommendation to a man that I know nothing about. Besides, you could not do it. This Italian friend of yours, this Prior of San Stefano, would not let the matter fall through. He and Brett would bring forward the witnesses——"

Dino turned his eyes slowly upon him with a curiously subtle look.

"No," he said. "I have received news to-day which puts the matter completely in my own hands. Vincenza Vasari is dead: Rosa Naldi is dying. They were in a train when a railway accident took place. They will never be able to appear as witnesses."

"But they made depositions——"

"Yes. I believe these depositions would establish the case. But depositions are written upon paper, and hearsay evidence is not admitted. Nobody could prove it, if I did not wish it to be proved."

"I doubt whether it could be proved at all," said Percival, hesitatingly. "Of course, it would make Miss Murray uncomfortable. And if that other Brian Luttrell is living still, the money would go back to him. Would he divide it with you, do you think, if he got it, even as you would share it all with him?"

"I believe so," answered Dino. "But I should not want it—unless it were to give to the monastery; and San Stefano is already rich. A monk has no wants."

"But I am not a monk. There lies the unfairness of your proposal. You give up what you care for very little: I am to give up what is dearer than the whole world to me. No; I won't do it. It's absurd."

"Is this your answer, Mr. Heron?" said Dino. "Will you sacrifice Brian's happiness—I say nothing of her's, for you understand her best—for your own?"

"Yes, I will," Percival declared, roundly. "No man is called

upon to give up his life for another without good reason. Your friend is nothing to me. I'll get what I can out of the world for myself. It is little enough, but I cannot be expected to surrender it for some ridiculous notion of unselfishness. I never professed to be unselfish in my life. Mr. Stretton is a man to whom I owe a grudge. I acknowledge it."

Dino sighed heavily. The shade of disappointment upon his face was so deep that Heron felt some pity for him—all the more because he believed that the monk was destined to deeper disappointment still. He turned to him with almost a friendly look.

"You can't expect extraordinary motives from an ordinary man like me," he said. "I must say in all fairness that you have made a generous proposal. If I spoke too violently and hastily, I hope you will overlook it. I was rather beside myself with rage—though not with the sort of regret which Mr. Brett kindly attributes to me."

"I understood that," said Dino.

By a sudden impulse Percival held out his hand. It was a strong testimony to Dino's earnestness and simplicity of character that the two parted friends after such a stormy interview.

As they went out of the office together Percival said, abruptly:—

"Where are you staying?"

Dino named the place.

"With the man you call Brian Luttrell?"

"With Brian Luttrell."

"What is the next thing you mean to do?"

"I must tell Brian that I have betrayed his secret."

"Oh, he won't be very angry with you for that!" laughed Percival.

Dino shook his head. He was not so sure.

As soon as they had separated, Percival went off at a swinging pace for a long walk. It was his usual way of getting rid of annoyance or excitement; and he was vexed to find that he could not easily shake off the effects that his conversation with Dino Vasari had produced upon his mind. The unselfishness, the devotion, of this man—younger than himself, with a brilliant future before him if only he chose to take advantage of it—appealed powerfully to his imagination. He tried to laugh at it: he called Dino hard names—"Quixotic fool," "dreamer," and "enthusiast"—but he could not forget that an ideal of conduct had been presented to his eyes, which was far higher than any which he should have thought possible for himself, and by a man upon whose profession of faith and calling he looked with profound contempt.

He tried to disbelieve the story that he had been told. He tried hard to think that the man whom Elizabeth loved could not be Brian Luttrell. He strove to convince himself that Elizabeth would be happier with him than with the man she loved. Last of all he struggled desperately with the conviction that it was his highest duty to tell her the whole story, set her free, and let Brian marry her if he chose. With the respective claims of Dino, Brian, and Elizabeth to the estate, he felt that he had no need to interfere. They must settle it amongst themselves.

Of one thing he wanted to make sure. Was the tutor who had come with the Herons from Italy indeed Brian Luttrell? How could he ascertain?

Chance favoured him, he thought. On the following morning he met Hugo Luttrell in town, and accosted him with unusual eagerness.

"I've an odd question to ask you," he said, "but I have a strong reason for it. You saw the tutor at Strathleckie when you were in Scotland?"

"Yes," said Hugo, looking at him restlessly out of his long, dark eyes.

"Had you any idea that Stretton was not his real name?"

Hugo paused before he replied.

"It is rather an odd question, certainly," he said, with a temporising smile. "May I ask what you want to know for?"

"I was told that he came to the house under a feigned name: that's all."

"Who told you so?"

"Oh, a person who knew him."

"An Italian? A priest?"

Hugo was thinking of the possibility of Father Christoforo's having made his way to England.

"Yes," said Percival, dubiously. "A Benedictine monk, I believe. He hinted that you knew Stretton's real name."

"Quite a mistake," said Hugo. "I know nothing about him. But your priest sounds romantic. An old fellow, isn't he, with grey hair?"

"Not at all: young and slight, with dark eyes and rather a finely-cut face. Calls himself Dino Vasari or some such name."

Hugo started: a yellowish pallor overspread his face. For a moment he stopped short in the street: then hurried on so fast that Percival was left a few steps behind.

"What's the matter? Do you know him?" said Heron, overtaking him by a few vigorous strides.

"A little. He's the biggest scoundrel I ever met," replied Hugo, slackening his pace and trying to speak easily. "I was

surprised at his being in England, that was all. Do you know where he lives, that I may avoid the street!" he added, laughing.

Percival told him, wondering at his evident agitation.

"Then you can't tell me anything about Stretton?" he said, as they came to a building which he was about to enter.

"Nothing. Wish I could, said Hugo, turning away.

"So he escaped, after all!" he murmured to himself, as he walked down the street, with an occasional nervous glance to the right and left. "I thought I had done my work effectually: I did not know I was such a bungler. Does he guess who attacked him, I wonder? I suppose not, or I should have heard of the matter before now. Fortunate that I took the precaution of drugging him first. What an escape! And he has got hold of Heron! I shall have to make sure of the old lady pretty soon, or I foresee that Netherglen—and Kitty—never will be mine."

CHAPTER XXX.

FRIENDS AND BROTHERS.

In a little room on the second-floor of a London lodging-house near Manchester-square, Brian Luttrell was packing a box, with the few scanty possessions that he called his own. He had little light to see by, for the slender, tallow candle burnt with a very uncertain flame: the glare of the gas lamps in the street gave almost a better light. The floor was uncarpeted, the furniture scanty and poor: the fire in the grate smouldered miserably, and languished for want of fuel. But there was a contented look on Brian's face. He even whistled and hummed to himself as he packed his box, and though the tune broke down, and ended with a sigh, it showed a mind more at ease than Brian's had been for many a long day.

"Heigho!" he said, rising from his task, and giving the box a shove with his foot into a corner, "I wonder where Dino is? He ought not to be out so late with that cough of his. I suppose he has gone to Brett and Grattan's. I am glad the dear fellow has put himself into their hands. Right ought to be done: she would have said so herself, and I know Dino will be generous. It would suit him very well to take a money compensation, and let her continue to reign, with glories somewhat shorn, however, at Strathleckie. I am afraid he will do nothing but enrich San Stefano with his inheritance. He certainly will not settle down at Netherglen as a country squire.

"What will my mother say? Pooh! I must get out of that

habit of calling her my mother. She is no relation of mine, as she herself told me. Mrs. Luttrell!—it sounds a little odd. Odder, too, to think that I must never sign myself Brian Luttrell any more. Bernardino Vasari! I think I might as well stick to the plain John Stretton, which I adopted on the spur of the moment at San Stefano. I suppose I shall soon have to meet the woman who calls herself—who is—my mother. I will say nothing harsh or unkind to her, poor thing! She has done herself a greater injury than she has done me."

So he meditated, with his face bent over his folded arms upon the mantelpiece. A slow step on the stair roused him, he poked the fire vigorously, lighted another candle, and then opened the door.

"Is that you, Dino?" he said. "Where have you been for the last three hours?"

Dino it was. He came in without speaking, and dropped into a chair, as if exhausted with fatigue. Brian repeated his question, but when Dino tried to answer it, a fit of coughing choked his words. It lasted several minutes, and left him panting, with the perspiration standing in great beads upon his brow.

With a grave and anxious face Brian brought him some water, wrapped a cloak round his shaking shoulders, and stood by him, waiting for the paroxysm of coughing to abate. Dino's cough was seldom more than the little hacking one, which the wound in his side seemed to have left, but it was always apt to grow worse in cold or foggy weather, and at times increased to positive violence. Brian, who had visited him regularly while he was in hospital, and nursed him with a woman's tenderness as soon as he was discharged from it, had never known it to be so bad as it was on this occasion.

"You've been overdoing yourself, old fellow," he said, affectionately, when Dino was able to look up and smile. "You have been out too late. And this den of mine is not the place for you. You must clear out of it as soon as you can."

"Not as long as you are here," said Dino.

"That was all very well as long as we could remain unknown. But now that Brett and Grattan consent to take up your case, as I knew they would all along, they will want to see you: your friends and relations will want to visit you; and you must not be found here with me. I'll settle you in new lodgings before I sail. There's a comfortable place in Piccadilly that I used to know, with a landlady who is honest and kind."

"Too expensive for me," Dino murmured, with a pleasant light in his eyes, as Brian made preparations for their evening meal, with a skill acquired by recent practice.

"You forget that your expenses will be paid out of the estate," said Brian, "in the long run. Did not Brett offer to advance you funds if you wanted them?"

"Yes, and I declined them. I had enough from Father Christoforo," answered Dino, rather faintly. "I did not like to run the risk of spending what I might not be able to repay."

"Brett would not have offered you money if he did not feel very sure of his case. There can be no doubt of that," said Brian, as he set two cracked tea-cups on the table, and produced a couple of chops and a frying-pan from a cupboard. "You need not be afraid."

For some minutes the sound of hissing and spluttering that came from the frying-pan effectually prevented any further attempts at conversation. When the cooking was over, Dino again addressed his friend.

"Do you want to know what I have been doing?"

"Yes, I mean you to give an account of yourself. But not until you have had some food. Eat and drink first; then talk."

Dino smiled and came to the table. But he had no appetite: he swallowed a few mouthfuls, evidently to please Brian only; then went back to the solitary arm-chair by the fire, and closed his eyes.

Brian did not disturb him. It was plain that Dino, not yet strong after his accident, had wearied himself out. He was glad, however, when the young man roused himself from a light and fitful doze, and said in his naturally tranquil voice:—

"I am ready to give an account of myself, as you call it, now."

"Then tell me," said Brian, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, and looking down upon the pale, somewhat emaciated countenance, with a tender smile, "what you mean by going about London in a dress which I thought that you had renounced for ever?"

"It only means," said Dino, returning the smile, "that you were mistaken. I had not renounced it, and I think that I shall keep to it now."

"You can hardly do that in your position," said Brian, quietly.

"My position! What is that to me? 'I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord'—you know what I mean: I have said it all to you before. If I go back to Italy, Brian, and the case falls through, as it may do through lack of witnesses, will you not take your own again?"

"And turn out Miss Murray? Certainly not." Then, after a pause, Brian asked, rather sternly, "What do you mean by the lack of witnesses? There are plenty of witnesses. There is—my—my mother—for one."

"No. She is dead."

"Dead. Vincenza Vasari dead?"

Dino recounted to him briefly enough the details of the catastrophe, but acknowledged, in reply to his quick questions, that there was no necessity for his claim to be given up on account of the death of these two persons. Mr. Brett, with whom he had conferred before visiting Percival Heron, had assured him that there could be no doubt of his identity with the child whom Mrs. Luttrell had given Vincenza to nurse; and, knowing the circumstances, he thought it probable that the law-suit would be an amicable one, and that Miss Murray would consent to a compromise. All this, Dino repeated, though with some reluctance, to his friend.

"You see, Brian," he continued, "there will be no reason for your hiding yourself if my case is proved. You would not be turning out Miss Murray or anybody else. You would be my friend, my brother, my helper. Will you not stay in England and be all this to me? I ask you, as I have asked you many times before, but I ask it now for the last time. Stay with me, and let it be no secret that you are living still."

"I can't do it, Dino. I must go. You promised not to ask it of me again, dear old fellow."

"Let me come with you, then. We will both leave Miss Murray to enjoy her inheritance in peace."

"No, that would not be just."

"Just! What do I care for justice?" said Dino, indignantly, while his eyes grew dark and his cheeks crimson with passionate feeling. "I care for you, for her, for the happiness of you both. Can I do nothing towards it?"

"Nothing, I think, Dino mio."

"But you will stay with me until you go? You will not cast me off as you have cast off your other friends? Promise me."

"I promise you, Dino," said Brian, laying his hand soothingly on the other's shoulder. It seemed to him that Dino must be suffering from fever; that he was taking a morbidly exaggerated view of matters. But his next words showed that his excitement proceeded from no merely physical cause.

"I have done you no harm, at any rate," he said, rising and holding Brian's hand between his own. "I have made up my mind. I will have none of this inheritance. It shall either be yours or hers. I do not want it. And I have taken the first step towards ridding myself of it."

"What have you done?" said Brian.

"Will you ever forgive me?" asked Dino, looking half-sadly,

half-doubtfully, into his face. "I am not sure that you ever will. I have betrayed you. I have said that you were alive."

Brian's face first turned red, then deathly pale. He withdrew his hand from Dino's grasp, and took a backward step.

"You!" he said, in a stifled voice. "You! whom I thought to be my friend!"

"I am your friend still," said Dino.

Brian resumed his place by the mantelpiece, and played mechanically with the ornaments upon it. His face was pale still, but a little smile had begun to curve his lips.

"So," he said, slowly, "my deep-laid plans are frustrated, it seems. I did not think you would have done this, Dino. I took a good deal of trouble with my arrangements."

The tone of gentle satire went to Dino's heart. He looked appealingly at Brian, but did not speak.

"You have made me look like a very big fool," said Brian, quietly, "and all to no purpose. You can't make me stay in England, you know, or present myself to be recognised by Mrs. Luttrell, and old Colquhoun. I shall vanish to South America under another name, and leave no trace behind, and the only result of your communication will be to disturb people's minds a little, and to make them suppose that I had repented of my very harmless deception, and was trying to get money out of you and Miss Murray."

"Nobody would think so who knows you."

"Who does know me? Not even you, Dino, if you think I would take advantage of what you have said to-night. Go to-morrow, and tell Brett that you were mistaken. It is Brett you have told, of course."

"It is not Brett."

"Who then?"

"Mr. Percival Heron," said Dino, looking him steadily in the face.

Brian drew himself up into an upright posture, with an ejaculation of astonishment. "Good Heavens, Dino! What have you been doing?"

"My duty," answered Dino.

"Your duty! Good Heavens!—unpardonable interference I should call it from any one but you. You don't understand the ways of the world! How should you, fresh from a Romish seminary? But you should understand that it is wiser, safer, not to meddle with the affairs of other people."

"Your affairs are mine," said Dino, with his eyes on the ground.

Brian laughed bitterly. "Hardly, I think. I have given no

one any authority to act for me. I may manage my affairs badly, but on the whole I must manage them for myself."

"I knew that I should have to bear your reproaches," said Dino, with folded arms and downcast eyes. Then, after a pause, during which Brian walked up and down the room impatiently, he added in a lower tone, "But I did not think that they would have been so bitter."

Brian stopped short and looked at him, then came and laid his hand gently on his shoulder. "Poor Dino!" he said, "I ought to remember how unlike all the rest of the world you are. Forgive me. I did not mean to hurt you. No doubt you thought that you were acting for the best."

Dino looked up, and met the somewhat melancholy kindness of Brian's gaze. His heart was already full: his impulsive nature was longing to assert itself: with one great sob he threw his arms round Brian's neck, and fell weeping upon his shoulder.

"But, my dear Dino," said Brian, when the storm (the reason of which he understood very imperfectly) had subsided, "you must see that this communication of my secret to Mr. Heron will make a difference in my plans."

"What difference?"

"I must start to-morrow instead of next week."

"No, Brian, no."

"I must, indeed. Heron will tell your story to Brett, to Colquhoun, to Mrs. Luttrell, to Miss Murray. He may have telegraphed it already. It is very important to him, because, you see," said Brian, with a sad half-smile, "he is going to marry Miss Murray, and, unless he knows your history, he will think that my existence will deprive her of her fortune."

"I do not believe he will tell your story to anyone.'

"Dino, caro mio! Heron is a man of honour. He can do nothing less, unfortunately."

"I think he will do less. I think that no word of what I have told him will pass his lips."

"It would be impossible for him to keep silence," remarked Brian, coldly, and Dino said nothing more.

It was after a long silence, when the candle had died out, and the fire had grown so dim that they could not see each other's faces, that Brian said in a low, but quiet tone—

"Did you tell him why I left Strathleckie?"

"Yes, I did."

Brian suppressed a vexed exclamation. It was no use trying to make Dino understand his position.

"What did he say?" he asked.

"He knew already."

"Ah! Yes. So I should have supposed." And there the conversation ended.

Long after Dino was tranquilly sleeping, Brian Luttrell sat by the ricketty round table in the middle of the room labouring at the composition of one or two letters, which seemed very difficult to write. Sheet after sheet was torn up and thrown aside. The grey dawn was creeping in at the window before the last word was written, and the letters placed within their respective envelopes. Slowly and carefully he wrote the address of the longest letter—wrote it, as he thought, for the last time—Mrs. Luttrell, Netherglen, Dunmuir. Then he stole quietly out of the house, and slipped it into the nearest pillar-box. The other letter—a few lines merely—he put in his pocket, unaddressed. On his return he entered the tiny slip of a room which Dino occupied, fearing lest his movements should have disturbed the sleeper. But Dino had not stirred. Brian stood and looked at him for a little while, thinking of the circumstances in which they had first met, of the strange bond which subsisted between them, and lastly of the curious betrayal of his confidence, so unlike Dino's usual conduct, which Brian charitably set down to ignorance of English customs and absence of English reserve. He guessed no finer motive, and his mouth curled with an irrepressible, if somewhat mournful, smile, as he turned away, murmuring to himself:—

"I have had my revenge."

He did not leave England next day. Dino's entreaties weighed with him; and he knew also that he himself had acted in a way which was likely to nullify his friend's endeavours to reinstate him in his old position. He waited with more curiosity than apprehension for the letter, the telegram, the visit, that would assure him of Percival's uprightness. For Brian had no doubt in his own mind as to what Percival Heron ought to do. If he learnt that Brian Luttrell was still living, he ought to communicate the fact to Mr. Colquhoun at least. And if Mr. Colquhoun were the kindly old man that he used to be, he would probably hasten to London to shake hands once more with the boy that he had known and loved in early days. Brian was so certain of this that he caught himself listening for the door-bell, and rehearsing the sentences with which he should excuse his conduct to his kind, old friend.

But two days passed away, and he watched in vain. No message, no visitor, came to show him that Percival Heron had told the story. Perhaps, however, he had written it in a letter. Brian silently calculated the time that a letter and its answer

would take. He found that by post it was not possible to get a reply until an hour after the time at which he was to start.

In those two days Dino had an interview with Mr. Brett, from which he returned looking anxious and uneasy. He told Brian, however, nothing of its import, and Brian did not choose to ask. The day and the hour of Brian's departure came without further conversation between them on the subject which was, perhaps, nearer than any other to their hearts. Dino wanted to accompany his friend to the ship by which he was to sail: but Brian steadily refused to let him do so. It was strange to see the relation between these two. In spite of his youth, Dino usually inspired a feeling of respect in the minds of other men: his peculiarly grave and tranquil manner made him appear older and more experienced than he really was. But with Brian, he fell naturally into the position of a younger brother: he seemed to take a delight in leaning upon Brian's judgment, and surrendering his own will. He had been brought up to depend upon others in this way all through his life; but Brian saw clearly enough that the habit was contrary to his native temperament, and that, when once freed from the leading-strings in which he had hitherto been kept, he would certainly prove himself a man of remarkably strong and clear judgment. It was this conviction that caused Brian to persist in his intention of going to South America: Dino would do better when left to himself, than when leaning upon Brian, as his affection led him to do.

"You will come back," said Dino, in a tone that admitted of no contradiction. "I know you will come back."

"Dino mio, you will come to see me some day, perhaps," said Brian. "Listen. I leave their future in your care. Do you understand? Make it possible for them to be happy."

"I will do what is possible to bring you home again."

"Caro mio, that is not possible," said Brian. "Do not try. You see this letter? Keep it until I have been an hour gone; then open it. Will you promise me that?"

"I promise."

"And now good-bye. Success and good fortune to you," said Brian, trying to smile. "When we meet again——"

"Shall we ever meet again?" said Dino, with one arm round Brian's neck, with his eyes looking straight into Brian's, with a look of pathetic longing which his friend never could forget. "Or is it a last farewell? Brother—my brother—God bless thee, and bring thee home at last." But it was of no earthly home that Dino thought.

And then they parted.

It was more than an hour before Dino thought of opening the letter which Brian had left with him. It ran as follows:—

"Dino mio, pardon me if I have done wrongly. You told my story and I have told yours. I feared lest you, in your generosity, should hide the truth, and therefore I have written fully to your mother. Go to her if she sends for you, and remember that she has suffered much. I have told her that you have the proofs: show them to her, and she will be convinced. God bless you, my only friend and brother."

Dino's head dropped upon his hands. Were all his efforts vain to free himself from the burden of a wealth which he did not desire? The Prior of San Stefano had forced him into the position of a claimant to the estate. With his long-formed habits of obedience it seemed impossible to gainsay the Prior's will. Here, in England, it was easier. And Dino was more and more resolved to take his own way.

A letter was brought to him at that moment. He opened it, and let his eyes run mechanically down the sheet. Then he started violently, and read it again with more attention. It contained one sentence and a signature:—

"If Dino Vasari of San Stefano will visit me at Netherglen, I will hear what he has to say.

"MARGARET LUTTRELL."

Could he have expected more? And yet, to his excited fancy, the words seemed cold and hard.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ACCUSER AND ACCUSED.

THERE had been solemn council in the house of Netherglen. Mrs. Luttrell and Mr. Colquhoun had held long interviews: letters and papers of all sorts had been produced and compared; the dressing-room door was closed against all comers, and even Angela was excluded. Hugo was once summoned, and came away from the conference with the air of a desperate man at once baffled and fierce. He lurked about the dark corners of the house, as if he were afraid to appear in the light of the day; but he took no one into his confidence. Fortune, character, life itself, perhaps, seemed to him to be hanging on a thread. For, if Dino Vasari remembered his treachery and exposed it, he knew that he should be ruined and disgraced. And he was resolved not to survive any such public exposure. He would die by his own hand rather than stand in the dock as a would-be murderer.

Even if things were not so bad as that, he did not see how he was to exonerate himself from another charge; a minor one,

indeed, but one which might make him look very black in some people's eyes. He had known of Dino's claims for many weeks, as well as of Brian's existence. Why had he told no one of his discoveries? What if Dino spoke of the tissue of lies which he had concocted, the forgery of Brian's handwriting, in the interview which they had had in Tarragon-street? Fortunately, Dino had burned the letter, and there had been no auditor of the conversation. Of course, he must deny that he had known anything of the matter. Dino could prove nothing against him; he could only make assertions. But assertions were awkward things sometimes.

So Hugo skulked and frowned and listened, and was told nothing definite; but saw by the light of previous knowledge that there was great excitement in the bosoms of his aunt and the family lawyer. There were letters and telegrams sent off, and Hugo was disgusted to find that he could not catch sight of their addresses, much less of their contents. Mr. Colquhoun looked gloomy; Mrs. Luttrell sternly exultant. What was going on? Was Brian coming home; or was Dino to be recognised in Brian's place?

Hugo knew nothing. But one fine autumn morning, as he was standing in the garden at Netherglen, he saw a dog-cart turn in at the gate, a dog-cart in which four men had with some difficulty squeezed themselves—the driver, Mr. Colquhoun, Dino Vasari, and a red-faced man, whom Hugo recognised, after a minute's hesitation, as the well-known solicitor, Mr. Brett.

Hugo drew back into the shrubbery and waited. He dared not show himself. He was trembling in every limb. The hour of his disgrace was drawing near.

Should he take advantage of the moment, and leave Netherglen at once, or should he wait and face it out? After a little reflection he determined to wait. From what he had seen of Dino Vasari he fancied that it would not be easy to manage him. Yet he seemed to be a simple-minded youth, fresh from the precincts of a monastery: he could surely by degrees be cajoled or bullied into silence. If he did accuse Hugo of treachery, it was better, perhaps, that the accused should be on the spot to justify himself. If only Hugo could see him before the story had been told to Mrs. Luttrell!

He loitered about the house for some time, then went to his own room, and began to pack up various articles which he should wish to take away with him, if Mrs. Luttrell expelled him from the house. At every sound upon the stairs, he paused in his occupation and looked around nervously. When the luncheon-bell rang he actually dared not go down to the dining-room. He summoned

a servant, and ordered brandy and water and a biscuit, alleging an attack of illness as an excuse for his non-appearance. And, indeed, the suspense and anxiety which he was enduring made him feel and look really ill. He was sick with the agony of his dread.

The afternoon wore on. His window commanded a view of the drive: he was sure that the guests had not yet left the house. It was four o'clock when somebody at length approached his door, knocked, and then shook the door-handle.

"Hugo! Are you there?" It was Mr. Colquhoun's voice. "Can't you open the door?"

Hugo hesitated a moment: then turned the key, leaving Mr. Colquhoun to enter if he pleased. He came in looking rather astonished at this mode of admittance.

"So! It's sick, you are, is it? Well, I don't exactly wonder at that. You've lost your chance of Netherglen, Mr. Hugo Luttrell."

Hugo's face grew livid. He looked to Mr. Colquhoun for explanation, but did not speak.

"It's just the most remarkable coincidence I ever heard of," said Mr. Colquhoun, seating himself in the least comfortable chair the room afforded, and rubbing his forehead with a great, red silk-handkerchief. "Brian alive, and meeting with the very man who had a claim to the estate! Though, of course, if one thinks of it, it is only natural they should meet, when Mrs. Luttrell, poor body, had been fool enough to send Brian to San Stefano, the very place where the child was brought up. You know the story?"

"No," said Hugo. His heart began to beat wildly. Had Dino kept silence after all?

Mr. Colquhoun launched forth upon the whole history, to which Hugo listened without a word of comment. He was leaning against the window-frame, in a position from which he could still see the drive, and his face was so white that Mr. Colquhoun at last was struck by its pallor.

"Man alive, are you going to faint, Hugo? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I've had a headache. Then my aunt is satisfied as to the genuineness of this claim?"

"Satisfied! She's more than satisfied," said the old lawyer, with a groan. "I doubt myself whether the court will see the matter in the same light. If Miss Murray, or if Brian Luttrell, would make a good fight, I don't believe this Italian fellow would win the case. He might. Brett says he would. But Brian—God bless him! he might have told me he was living still—Brian has gone off to America, poor lad! and Elizabeth Murray—well, I'll make her fight, if I can, but I doubt—I doubt.'

"My aunt wants this fellow to have Strathleckie and Netherglen, too, then?"

"Yes, she does; so you are cut out there, Hugo. Don't build on Netherglen, if Margaret Luttrell's own son is living. I must be going: Brett's to dine with me. I used to know him in London."

"Is Dino Vasari staying here, then?"

Mr. Colquhoun raised a warning finger. "You'll have to learn to call him by another name, if he stays in this house, young man," he said. "He declines to be called Brian—he has that much good sense — but it seems that Dino is short for Bernardino, or some such mouthful, and we're to call him Bernard to avoid confusion. Bernard Luttrell—humph!—I don't know whether he will stay the night or not. We met Miss Murray on our way up. The young man looked at her uncommonly hard, and asked who she was. I think he was rather struck with her. Good-bye, Hugo; take care of yourself, and don't be too downhearted. Poor Brian always told me to look after you, and I will." But the assurance did not carry the consolation to Hugo's mind which Mr. Colquhoun intended.

The two lawyers drove away to Dunmuir together. Hugo watched the red lamps of the dog-cart down the road, and then turned away from the window with a gnawing sense of anxiety, which grew more imperious every moment. He felt that he must do something to relieve it. He knew where the interview with Dino was taking place. Mrs. Luttrell had lately been growing somewhat infirm: a slight stroke of paralysis, dangerous only in that it was probably the precursor of other attacks, had rendered locomotion particularly distasteful to her. She did not like to feel that she was dependent upon others for aid, and, therefore, sat usually in a wheeled chair in her dressing-room, and it was the most easily accessible room from her sleeping apartment. She was in her dressing-room now, and Dino Vasari was with her.

Hugo stole quietly through the passage until he reached the door of Mrs. Luttrell's bed-room, which was ajar. He slipped into the room and looked round. It was dimly lighted by the red glow of the fire, and by this dim light he saw that the door into the dressing-room was also not quite closed. He could hear the sound of voices. He paused a moment, and then advanced. There was a high screen near the door, of which one fold was so close to the wall that only a slight figure could slip behind it, though, when once behind there, it would be entirely hidden. Hugo measured it with his eye: he would have to pass the aperture of the door to reach it, but a cautious glance from a distance assured him that

Both Mrs. Luttrell and Dino had their backs to him and could not see. He ensconced himself, therefore, between the screen and the wall · he could see nothing, but every word fell distinctly upon his ear.

"Sit down beside me," Mrs. Luttrell was saying—how could her voice have grown so tender?—"and tell me everything about your past life. I knew—I always knew—that that other child was not my son. I have my own Brian now. Call me mother: it is long since I have heard the word."

"Mother!" Dino's musical tones were tremulous. "My mother! I have thought of her all my life."

"Ay, my poor son, and but for the wickedness of others, I might have seen and known you years ago. I had an interloper in my house throughout all those years, and he worked me the bitterest sorrow of my life."

"Do not speak so of Brian, mother," said Dino, gently. "He loved you—and he loved Richard. His loss—his grief—has been greater even than yours."

"How dare you say so to me?' said Mrs. Luttrell, with a momentary return to her old, grim tones. Then, immediately softening them—"But you may say anything you like. It is pleasure enough to hear your voice. You must stay with me, Brian, and let me feast my eyes on you for a time. I have no patience, no moderation left: 'my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.'"

He raised his mother's hand and kissed it silently. The action would, of course, have been lost upon Hugo, as he could not see the pair, but for Mrs. Luttrell's next words.

"Nay," she said, "kiss me on the cheek, not on the hand, Brian. I let Hugo Luttrell do it, because of his foreign blood; but you have only a foreign training which you must forget. They said something about your wearing a priest's dress: I am glad you did not wear it here, for you would have been mobbed in Dunmuir. It's a sad pity that you're a Papist, Brian; but we must set Mr. Drummond, our minister, to talk to you, and he'll soon show you the error of your ways."

"I shall be very glad to hear what Mr. Drummond has to say," said Dino, with all the courtesy which his monastic training had instilled; "but I fear that he will have his labour thrown away. And I have one or two things to tell you, mother, now that those gentlemen have gone. If I am to disappoint you, let me do it at once, so that you may understand."

"Disappoint me? and how can you do that?" asked Mrs. Luttrell, scornfully. "Perhaps you mean that you will winter in the South! If your health requires it, do you think I would stand

in the way? You have a sickly air, but it makes you all the more like one whom I well remember— your father's brother, who died of a decline in early youth. No, go if you like; I will not tie you down. You can come back in the summer, and then we will think about your settling down and marrying. There are plenty of nice girls in the neighbourhood, though none so good as Angela, nor perhaps so handsome as Elizabeth Murray."

"Mother, I shall never marry."

"Not marry? and why not?" cried Mrs. Luttrell, indignantly. "But you say this to tease me only; being a Luttrell—the only Luttrell, indeed, save Hugo, that remains—you must marry and continue the family."

"I shall never marry," said Dino, with a firmness which at last seemed to make an impression upon Mrs. Luttrell, "because I am going to be a monk."

Hugo could not stifle a quick catching of his breath. Did Dino mean what he said? And what effect would this decision have upon the lives of the many persons whose future seemed to be bound up with his? What would Mrs. Luttrel say?

At first she said nothing. And then Dino's voice was heard again.

"Mother, my mother, do not look at me like that. I must follow my vocation. I would have given myself years ago, but I was not allowed. The Prior will receive me now. And nothing on earth will turn me from my resolution. I have made up my mind."

"What!" said Mrs. Luttrell, very slowly. "You will desert me too, after all these years!"

Dino answered by repeating in Latin the words—"He that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me." But Mrs. Luttrell interrupted him angrily.

"I want none of your Latin gibberish," she said. "I want plain commonsense. If you go into a monastery, do you intend to give the property to the monks? Perhaps you want to turn Netherglen into a convent, and establish a priory at Strathleckie? Well, I cannot prevent you. What fools we are to think that there is any happiness in this world!"

"Mother!" said Dino, and his voice was very gentle, "let me speak to you of another before we talk about the estates. Let me speak to you of Brian."

"Brian!" Her voice had a checked tone for a moment; then she recovered herself and spoke in her usual harsh way. "I know no one of that name but you."

"I mean my friend whom you thought to be your son for so many years, mother. Have you no tenderness for him? Do you

not think of him with a little love and pity? Let me tell you what he suffered. When he came to us first at San Stefano he was nearly dying of grief. It was long before we nursed him back to health. When I think how we all learnt to love him, mother, I cannot but believe that you must love him, too."

"I never loved him," said Mrs. Luttrell. "He stood in your place. If you had a spark of proper pride in you, you would know that he was your enemy, and you will feel towards him as I do."

"He is an enemy that I have learned to love," answered Dino. "At any rate, mother"—his voice always softened when he called her by that name—"at any rate, you will try to love him now."

"Why now?" She asked the question sharply.

"Because I mean him to fill my place."

There was a little silence, in which the fall of a cinder from the grate could be distinctly heard. Then Mrs. Luttrell uttered a long, low moan. "Oh, my God!" she said. "What have I done that I should be tormented in this way?"

"Mother, mother, do not say so," said Dino, evidently with deep emotion. Then, in a lower and more earnest voice, he added—"Perhaps if you had tried to love the child that Vincenza placed within your arms that day, you would have felt joy and not sorrow now."

"Do you dare to rebuke your mother?" said Mrs. Luttrell, fiercely. "If I had loved that child, I would never have acknowledged you to-day. Not though all the witnesses in the world swore to your story."

"That perhaps would have been the better for me," said Dino, softly. "Mother, I am going away from you for ever; let me leave you another son. He has never grieved you willingly; forgive him for those misfortunes which he could not help; love him instead of me."

"Never!"

"He has gone to the other side of the world, but I think he would come back if he knew that you had need of him. Let me send him a line, a word, from you: make him the master of Netherglen, and let me go in peace."

"I will not hear his name, I will not tolerate his presence within these walls," cried Mrs. Luttrell, passionately. "He was never dear to me, never; and he is hateful to me now. He has robbed me of both my sons: his hand struck Richard down, and for twenty-three years he usurped your place. I will never see him again. I will never forgive him so long as my tongue can speak."

"Then may God forgive you," said Dino, in a strangely solemn

voice, "for you are doing a worse injustice, a worse wrong, than that done by the poor woman who tried to put her child in your son's place. Have you held that child upon your knee, kissed his face, and seen him grow up to manhood, without a particle of love for him in your heart? Did you send him away from you with bitter reproaches, because of the accident which he would have given his own life to prevent? You have spoilt his life, and you do not care. Your heart is hard then, and God will not let that hardness go unpunished. Mother, pray that his judgments may not descend upon you for this."

"You have no right to talk to me in that way," said Mrs. Luttrell, with a great effort. "I have not been unjust. You are ungrateful. If you go away from me, I will leave all that I possess to Hugo, as I intended to do. Brian, as you call him—Vincenza Vasari's son—shall have nothing."

"And Brian is to be disinherited in favour of Hugo Luttrell, is he?" said Dino, in a still lower voice, but one which the listener felt instinctively had a dangerous sound. "Do you know what manner of man this Hugo Luttrell is, that you wish to enrich him with your wealth, and make him the master of Netherglen?"

"I know no harm of him," she answered.

He paused a little, and turned his face—was it consciously or unconsciously?—towards the open door, from which could be seen the screen, behind which the unhappy listener crouched and quivered in agony of fear. Willingly would Hugo have turned and fled, but flight was now impossible. The fire was blazing brightly, and threw a red glow over all the room. If he emerged from behind the screen, his figure would be distinctly visible to Dino, whose face was turned in that direction. What was he going to say?

"I know no harm of him," she answered.

"Then I will enlighten you. Hugo Luttrell knew that Brian was alive, that I was in England, two months ago. A letter from the Prior of San Stefano must have been in some way intercepted by him; he made use of his knowledge, however, he obtained it, to bring the messages from Brian which were utterly false, to try and induce me to relinquish my claim on you; he forged a letter from Brian for that purpose; and finally——"

Mrs. Luttrell's voice, harsh and strident with emotion, against which she did her best to fight, broke the sudden silence.

"Do you call it fair and right," she said, "to accuse a man of such faults as these behind his back? If you want to tell me anything against Hugo, send for him and tell it to me in his presence. Then he can defend himself."

"He will try to defend himself, no doubt," said Dino, with a note of melancholy scorn in his grave, young voice. "But I will do nothing behind his back. You wish him to be summoned?"

"Yes, I do. Ring the bell instantly!" cried Mrs. Luttrell, whose loving ardour seemed to have given way to the most unmitigated resentment.

"Tell the servants to find him and bring him here."

"They would not have far to go," said Dino, coolly. "He is close to hand. Hugo Luttrell, come here and answer for yourself."

"What do you mean? Where is he?" exclaimed Mrs. Luttrell, struck with his tone of command. "He is not in this room!"

"No, but he is in the next, hiding behind that screen. He has been there for the last half-hour. You need play the spy no longer, sir. Have the goodness to step forward and show yourself."

The inexorable sternness of his voice struck the listeners with amaze. Pale as a ghost, trembling like an aspen leaf, Hugo emerged from his hiding-place, and confronted the mother and the son.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RETRIBUTION.

"CONFESS!" said Dino, whose stern voice and outstretched, pointing finger seemed terrible as those of some accusing and avenging angel to the wretched culprit. "Confess that I have only told the truth. Confess that you lied and forged and cheated to gain your own ends. Confess that when other means failed you tried to kill me. Confess—and then"—with a sudden lowering of his tones to the most wonderful exquisite tenderness—"God knows that I shall be ready to forgive!"

But the last words passed unheeded. Hugo cowered before his eye, covered his ears with his hands, and made a sudden dash to the door, with a cry that was more like the howl of a hunted wild animal, than the utterance of a human being. Mrs. Luttrell called for help, and half-rose from her chair. But Dino laid his hand upon her arm.

"Let him go," said he. "I have no desire to punish him. But I must warn you."

The door clanged behind the flying figure, and awakened the echoes of the old house. Hugo was gone: whither they knew not: away, perhaps, into the world of darkness that reigned without. Mrs. Luttrell sank back into her chair, trembling from head to foot.

"Mother," said Dino, going up to her, and kneeling before

her, "forgive me if I have spoken too violently. But I could not bear that you should never know what sort of man this Hugo Luttrell has grown to be."

Her hand closed convulsively on his. "How—how did you know—that he was there?"

"I saw his reflection in the mirror before me as he passed the open door. He was afraid, and he hid himself there to listen. Mother, never trust him again."

"Never—never," she stammered. "Stay with me—protect me."

"You will not need my protection," he said, looking at her with calm, surprised eyes. "You will have your friends: Mr. Colquhoun, and the beautiful lady that you call Angela. And, for my sake, let me think that you will have Brian, too."

"No, no!" Her voice took new strength as she answered him, and she snatched her hand angrily away from his close clasp. "I will never speak to him again."

"Not even when he returns?"

"You told me that he was gone to America?"

"I feel sure that some day he will come back. He will learn the truth—that I have withdrawn my claim; then he and Miss Murray must settle the matter of property between them. They may divide it; or they might even marry."

His voice was perfectly calm; he had brooded over this arrangement for so long that it scarcely struck him how terrible it would sound in Mrs. Luttrell's ears.

"Do you mean it?" she said, feebly. "You renounce your claim—to be—my son?"

"Oh, not your son, mother," he said, kissing the cold hand, which she immediately drew away from him. "Not your son! Not the claim to be loved, and the right to love you! But let that rest between ourselves. Why should the money that I do not want come between me and you, between me and my friend? Let Brian come home, and you will have two sons instead of one."

"Rather say that I shall have no son at all," said Mrs. Luttrell, with gathering anger. "If you do this thing I cast you off. I forbid you to give what is your own to Vincenza Vasari's son."

"You make it hard for me to act if you forbid me," said Dino, rising and standing before her with a pleading look upon his face. "But I hold to my intention, mother. I will not touch a penny of this fortune. It shall be Brian's, or Miss Murray's—never mine."

"The matter is in a lawyer's hands. Your rights will be proved in spite of you."

"I do not think they will. I hold the proofs in my hand. I can destroy them every one, if I choose."

"But you will not choose. Besides, these are the copies, not the originals."

"No, excuse me. I obtained the originals from Mr. Brett. He expects me to take them back to him to-night." Dino held out a roll of papers. "They're all here. I will not burn them, mother, if you will send for Brian back and let him have his share."

"They would be no use if he came back. You must have the whole or nothing. Let us make a bargain; give up your scheme of entering a monastery, and then I will consent to some arrangement with Brian about money matters. But I will never see him."

Dino shook his head. He turned to the fireplace with the papers in his hand.

"I withdraw my claims," he said, simply.

Mrs. Luttrell was quivering with suppressed excitement, but she mastered herself sufficiently to speak with perfect coldness.

"Unless you consent to abandon a monastic life, I would rather that your claims were given up," she said. "Let Elizabeth Murray keep the property, and do you and the man Vasari go your separate ways."

"Mother——"

"Call me 'mother' no longer," she said, sternly, "you are no more my son than he was, if you can leave me, in my loneliness and widowhood, to be a monk."

"Then—this is the end," said Dino.

With a sudden movement of the hand he placed the roll of papers in the very centre of the glowing fire. Mrs. Luttrell uttered a faint cry, and struggled to rise to her feet, but she had not the strength to do so. Besides, it was too late. With the poker, Dino held down the blazing mass, until nothing but a charred and blackened ruin remained. Then he laid down the poker, and faced Mrs. Luttrell with a wavering but victorious smile.

"It is done," he said, with something of exultation in his tone. "Now I am free. I have long seen that this was the only thing to do. And now I can acknowledge that the temptation was very great."

With lifted head and kindling eye, he looked, in this hour of triumph over himself, as if no temptation had ever assailed, or ever could assail, him. But then his glance fell upon Mrs. Luttrell, whose hands fiercely clutched the arms of her chair, whose features worked with uncontrollable agitation. He fell on his knees before her.

"Mother!" he cried. "Forgive me. Perhaps I was wrong. I will—I will . . . I will pray for you."

The last few words were spoken after a long pause, with a fall in his voice, which showed that they were not those which he had intended to say when he began the sentence. There was something solemn and pathetic in the sound. But Mrs. Luttrell would not hear.

"Go!" she said, hoarsely. "Go. You are no son of mine. Sooner Brian—or Hugo—than you. Go back to your monastery."

She thrust him away from her with her hands when he tried to plead. And at last he saw that there was no use in arguing, for she pulled a bell which hung within her reach, and, when the servant appeared, she placed the matter beyond dispute by saying sharply:—

"Show this gentleman out."

Dino looked at her face, clasped his hands in one last silent entreaty, and—went. There was no use in staying longer. The door closed behind him, and the woman who had thrust away from her the love that might have been hers, but for her selfishness and hardness of heart, was left alone.

A whirl of raging, angry thoughts made her brain throb and reel. She had put away from her what might have been the great joy of her life; her will, which had never been controlled by another, had been simply set aside and disregarded. What was there left for her to do? All the repentance in the world would not give her back the precious papers that her son had burnt before her eyes. And where had he gone? Back to his monastery? Should she never, never see him again? Was he tramping the long and weary way to the Dunmuir station, where the railway engine would presently come shrieking and sweeping out of the darkness, and, like a fabled monster in some old fairy tale, gather him into its embrace, and bear him away to a place whence he would never more return?

So grotesque this fancy appeared to her that her anger failed her, and she laughed a little to herself—laughed with bloodless lips that made no sound. A kind of numbness of thought came over her: she sat for a little time in blank unconsciousness of her sorrow, and yet she did not sleep. And then a host of vividly-pictured images began to succeed each other with frightful rapidity across the *tabula rasa* of her mind.

It seemed to her in that quiet hour she saw her son as he walked down the dark road to Dunmuir. The moon was just rising; the trees on either hand lifted their gaunt branches to a wild and starless sky. Whose face, white as that of a corpse, gleamed from between those leafless stems? Hugo's, surely.

And what did he hold in his hand? Was it a knife on which a faint ray of moonlight was palely reflected? He was watching for that solitary traveller who came with heedless step and hanging head upon the lonely road. In another moment the spring would be taken, the thrust made, and a dying man's blood would well out upon the stones. Could she do nothing? "Brian! Brian!" she cried—or strove to cry; but the shriek seemed to be stifled before it left her lips. "Brian!" Three times she tried to call his name, with an agony of effort which, perhaps, brought her back to consciousness—for the dream, if dream it was, vanished, and she awoke.

Awoke—to the remembrance of what she had heard, concerning Hugo's attempt on Dino's life, and the fact that she had sent her son out of the house to walk to Dunmuir alone. She was not so blind to Hugo's inherited proclivities to passion and revenge as she pretended to be. She knew that he was a dangerous enemy, and that Dino had incurred his hatred. What might not happen on that lonely road between Netherglen and Dunmuir if Dino (Brian, she called him) traversed it unwarned, alone, unarmed? She must send servants after him at once, to guard him as he went upon his way. She heard her maid in the next room. Should she call Janet, or should she ring the bell?

What a curiously-helpless sensation had come over her! She did not seem able to rouse herself. She could not lift her hand. She was tired; that was it. She would call Janet. "Janet!" But Janet did not hear.

How was it that she could not speak? Her faculties were as clear as usual: her memory was as strong as ever it had been. She knew exactly what she wanted: she could arrange in her own mind the sentences that she wished to say. But, try as she would, she could not articulate a word, she could not raise a finger, or make a sign. And again the terrible dread of what would happen to the son she loved took possession of her mind.

Oh, if only he would return, she would let him have his way. What did it matter that the proof of his birth had been destroyed? She would acknowledge him as her son before all the world; and she would let him divide his heritage with whomsoever he chose. Netherglen should be his, and the three claimants might settle between themselves, whether the rest of the property should belong to one of them, or be divided amongst the three. He might even go back to San Stefano; she would love him and bless him throughout, if only she knew that his life was safe. She went further. She seemed to be pleading with fate—or rather with God—for the safety of her

son. She would receive Brian with open arms; she would try to love him for Dino's sake. She would do all and everything that Dino required from her, if only she could conquer this terrible helplessness of feeling, this dumbness of tongue which had come over her. Surely it was but a passing phase: surely when someone came and stood before her the spell would be broken, and she would be able to speak once more.

The maid peeped in, thought she was sleeping, and quietly retired. No one ventured to disturb Mrs. Luttrell if she nodded, for at night she slept so little that even a few minutes' slumber in the daytime was a boon to her. A silent, motionless figure in her great arm-chair, with her hands folded before her in her lap, she sat—not sleeping—with all her senses unnaturally sharpened, it seemed to her; hearing every sound in the house, noting every change in the red embers of the fire in which the proof of her son's history had been consumed, and all the while picturing to herself some terrible tragedy going on outside the house, which a word from her might have averted. And she not able to pronounce that word!

Dino, meanwhile, had plunged into the darkness, without a thought of fear for himself. He walked away from the house just as she had seen him in her waking dream, with head bent and eyes fixed on the ground. He took the right road to Dunmuir, more by accident than by design, and walked beneath the rows of sheltering trees, through which the loch gleamed whitely on the one hand, while on the other the woods looked ominously black, without a thought of the revengeful ferocity which lurked beneath the velvet smoothness of Hugo Luttrell's outer demeanour. If something moved amongst the trees on his right hand, if something crouched amongst the brushwood, like a wild animal prepared to spring, he neither saw nor heard the tokens which might have moved him to suspicion. But suddenly it seemed to him that a wild cry rang out upon the stillness of the night air. His friend's name—or was it his own?—three times repeated, in tones of heartrending pain and terror. "Brian! Brian! Brian!" Whose voice had called him? Not that of anyone he knew. And yet, what stranger would use that name? He stopped, looked round, and answered:—

"Yes, I am here."

And then it struck him that the voice had been close beside him, and that, standing where he stood in the middle of the long, white road, it was quite impossible that any one could be so near, and yet remain unseen.

With a slight shudder he let his eyes explore the sides of the

road: the hedgerows, and the bank that rose on his right hand towards the wood. Surely there was something that moved and stopped, and moved again amongst the bracken. With one bound Dino reached the moving object, and dragged it forth into the light. He knew whom he was touching before he saw the face. It was Hugo who lurked in the hedgerows, waiting—and for what?

"You heard it?" said Dino, as the young man crouched before him, scarcely daring to lift up his head, although at that moment, if he had had his wits about him, he could not have had a better chance for the accomplishment of any sinister design. "Who called?"

Hugo cast a quick startled glance at the wood behind him. "I heard nothing," he said, sullenly.

"I heard a voice that called me," said Dino. Then he looked at Hugo, and pressed his shoulder somewhat heavily with his hand. "What were you doing there? For whom were you waiting?"

"For nobody," muttered Hugo.

"Are you sure of that? I could almost believe that you were waiting for me; and should I be far wrong? When I think of that other time, when you deceived me, and trapped me, and left me dying, as you thought, in the streets, I can believe anything of you now."

Hugo's trembling lips refused to articulate a word. He could neither deny the charge nor plead for mercy.

Dino's exultation of mood led him to despise an appeal to any but the higher motives. He would not condescend to threaten Hugo with the police-court and the criminal cell. He loosed his hold on the young man's shoulder, and told him to rise from the half-kneeling posture, to which fear, rather than Dino's strength, had brought him. And when Hugo stood before him, he spoke in the tone of one to whom the spiritual side of life was more real, more important than any other, and it seemed to Hugo as if he spoke from out some other world.

"There is a day coming," he said, "when the secrets of all men's hearts will be revealed. And where will you be, what will you do in that dread day? When you stand before the Judge of all men on His great white Throne, how will you justify yourself to Him?"

The strong conviction, the deep penetrating accents of his words, carried a sting to Hugo's conscience. He felt as if Dino had a supernatural knowledge of his past life and his future, when he said solemnly:—

"Think of the secrets of your heart which shall then be made

known to all men. What have you done? Have you not broken God's laws? Have you not in very truth committed murder? . . . There is a commandment in God's Word which says, 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

"Stop, stop, for Heaven's sake, stop!" gasped Hugo, covering his face with his hands. "How can you know all this? I did not mean to kill him. I meant only to have my revenge. I did not know——"

"Nay, do not try to excuse yourself," said Dino, who caught the words imperfectly, and did not understand that they referred to any crime but the one so nearly accomplished against himself. "God knows all. He saw what you did: He can make it manifest in His own way. Confess to Him now: not to me. I pardon you."

There was a great sob from behind Hugo's quivering fingers; but it was only of relief, not repentance. Dino waited a moment or two before he said, with the tone of quiet authority which was natural to him:—

"Now fetch me the knife which you dropped amongst the ferns by the hedge over there."

With the keen, quick sight that he possessed, he had caught a glimpse of it in the scuffle, and seen it drop from Hugo's hand. But the young Sicilian took the order as another proof of the sort of superhuman knowledge of his deeds and motives which he attributed to Dino Vasari, and went submissively to the place where the weapon was lying, picked it up, and with hanging head, presented it humbly to the man whose spiritual force had for the moment mastered him.

"You must not return to Netherglen," said Dino, looking at him as he spoke. "My mother will not see you again: she does not want you near her. You understand?"

Hugo assented, with a sort of stifled groan.

"I was forced to tell her, in order to put her on her guard. But if you obey me, I will tell no one else. I have not even told Brian. If I find that you return to your evil courses, I shall keep the secret of your conduct no longer. Then, when Brian comes home, he can reckon with you."

"Brian!" ejaculated Hugo.

"Yes: Brian. What I require from you is that you trouble Netherglen no more. I cannot think of you with peace in my mother's house. You will leave it to-night—at once."

"Yes," Hugo muttered. He had no desire to return to Netherglen.

"I am going to Dunmuir," said Dino. "You can walk on with me."

Hugo made no opposition. He turned his face vaguely in the

specified direction, and moved onward; but the sound of Dino's voice, clear and cold, gave him a thrill of shame, amounting to positive physical pain.

"Walk before me, if you please. I cannot trust you."

They walked on: Hugo a pace or two in front, Dino behind. Not a word was spoken between them until they reached the chief street of Dunmuir, and then Dino called to him to pause. They were standing in front of Mr. Colquhoun's door.

"You are not going in here?" said Hugo, with a sharp note of terror in his voice. "You will not tell Colquhoun?"

"I will tell no one," said Dino, "so long as you fulfil the condition I have laid upon you. This is our last word on the subject. God forgive you, as I do."

They stood for a moment, face to face. The moon had risen, and its light fell peacefully upon the paved street, the old stone houses, the broad, beautiful river with its wooded banks, the distant sweep of hills. It fell also on the faces of the two men, not unlike in feature and colouring, but totally dissimilar in expression, and seemed to intensify every point of difference between them. There was a lofty serenity upon Dino Vasari's brow, while guilt and fear and misery were deeply imprinted on Hugo's boyish, beautiful face. For the first time the contrast between them struck forcibly on Hugo's mind. He leaned against the stone wall of Mr. Colquhoun's house, and gave vent to his emotion in one bitter, remorseful sob of pain.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHAT PERCIVAL KNEW.

MR. COLQUHOUN and Mr. Brett were sitting over their wine in the well-lighted, well-warmed dining-room of the lawyer's house. They had been friends in their earlier days, and were delighted to have an opportunity of meeting (in a strictly unprofessional way) and chatting over the memories of their youth. It was a surprise to both of them when the door was opened to admit Dino Vasari and Hugo Luttrell: two of the last visitors whom Mr. Colquhoun expected. His bow to Dino was a little stiff: his greeting of Hugo more cordial than usual.

"You come from Mrs. Luttrell?" he asked, in surprise.

Hugo's pallid lips, and look of agitation, convinced him that some disaster was impending. But Dino answered with great composure.

"I come to bring you news which I think ought not to be kept from you for a moment longer than is necessary," he said.

"Pray take a glass of wine, Mr.—er—Mr.——" The lawyer

did not quite know how to address his visitor. "Won't you sit down, Hugo?"

"I have not come to stay," said Dino. "I am going to the hotel for the night. I wished only to speak to you at once." He put one hand on the table by which he was standing and glanced at Mr. Brett. For the first time he showed some embarrassment. "I hope it will not inconvenience you," he said, "if I tell you that I have withdrawn my claim."

Dead silence fell on the assembly. Mr. Brett pushed back his chair a little way and stared. Mr. Colquhoun shook his head and smiled.

"I find," continued Dino, "that Mrs. Luttrell and I have entirely different views as to the disposition of the property and the life that I ought to lead. I cannot give up my plans—even for her. The easiest way to set things straight is to let the estate remain in Miss Murray's hands."

"You can't!" said Mr. Colquhoun, abruptly. "Brian Luttrell is alive!"

"Then let it go to Brian Luttrell."

"My dear sir," said Mr. Brett, "you have offered us complete documentary evidence that the gentleman now on his way to America is not Brian Luttrell at all."

"Yes, but there is only documentary evidence," said Dino. "The deaths of Vincenza Vasari and Rosa Naldi in a railway accident deprived us of anything else."

"Where are those papers?" asked Mr. Brett, sharply. "I hope they are safe."

"Quite safe, Mr. Brett. I have burnt them all." The shock of this communication was too much, even for the case-hardened Mr. Brett. He turned positively pale.

"Burnt them! Burnt them!" he ejaculated. "Oh, the man is mad. Burnt the proofs of his position and birth——"

"I have done all that I wanted to do," said Dino, colouring as the three pairs of eyes were fastened upon him with different expressions of disbelief, surprise, and even scorn. "My mother knows that I am her son: that is all I cared for. That is what I came for, not for the estate."

"But, my dear, young friend," said Mr. Colquhoun, with unusual gentleness, "don't you see that if Mrs. Luttrell and Brian and Miss Murray are all convinced that you are Mrs. Luttrell's son, you are doing them a wrong by destroying the proofs and leaving everybody in an unsettled state? You should never have come to Scotland at all if you did not mean to carry the matter through."

"That's what I say," cried Mr. Brett, who was working himself

up into a violent passion. "He has played fast and loose with all us! He has tricked and cheated me. Why, he had a splendid case! And to think that it can be set aside in this way!"

"Very informal," said Mr. Colquhoun, shaking his head, but with a little gleam of laughter in his eye. If Dino Vasari had told the truth, the matter had taken a fortunate turn in Mr. Colquhoun's opinion.

"Scandalous! scandalous!" exclaimed Mr. Brett. "Actionable, I call it. You had no right to make away with those papers, sir. However, it may be possible to repair the loss. They were not all there."

"I will not have it," said Dino, decisively. "Nothing more shall be done. I waive my claims entirely. Brian and Miss Murray can settle the rest."

And then the party broke up. Mr. Brett seized his client by the arm and bore him away to the hotel, arguing and scolding as he went. Before his departure, however, Dino found time to say a word in Mr. Colquhoun's ear.

"Will you kindly look after Hugo to-night?" he said. "Mrs. Luttrell will not wish him to return to Netherglen."

"Oh! There's been a quarrel, has there?" said Mr. Colquhoun eyeing the young man curiously.

After a little consideration, Dino thought himself justified in saying "Yes."

"I will see after him. You are going with Brett. You'll not have a smooth time of it."

"It will be smoother by-and-bye. You will shake hands with me, Mr. Colquhoun?"

"That I will," said the old lawyer, heartily. "And wish you God-speed, my lad. You've not been very wise, maybe, but you've been generous."

"You will have Brian home, before long, I hope."

"I hope so. I hope so. It's a difficult matter to settle," said Mr. Colquhoun, cautiously, "but I think we might see our way out of it if Brian were at home. If you want a friend, lad, come to me."

Left alone with Hugo, the solicitor took his place once more at the table, and hastily drank off a glass of wine, then glanced at his silent guest with a queerly-questioning look.

"What's wrong with ye, lad?" he said. "Cheer up, and drink a glass of good port wine. Your aunt has quarrelled with many people before you, and she'll like enough come to her senses in course of time."

"Did he say I had quarrelled with my aunt?" asked Hugo, in a dazed sort of way.

"Well, he said as much. He said there had been a quarrel. He asked me to keep an eye on you. Why, Hugo, my man, what's the matter?"

For Hugo, utterly careless of the old man's presence, suddenly laid his arms on the table, and his head on his arms, and burst into passionate hysterical tears.

"Tut, tut, tut, man! this will never do," said Mr. Colquhoun, rebukingly. "You're not a girl, nor a child, to cry for a sharp word or two. What's wrong?"

But he got no answer. Not even when Hugo, spent and exhausted with the violence of his emotion, lifted up his face and asked hoarsely for brandy. Mr. Colquhoun gave him what he required, without asking further questions, and tried to induce him to take some solid food; but Hugo absolutely refused to swallow anything but a stiff glass of brandy and water, and allowed himself to be conducted to a bed-room, where he flung himself face downwards on the bed, and preserved a sullen silence.

Mr. Colquhoun did not press him to speak. "I'll hear it all from Margaret Luttrell to-morrow morning," he said to himself. "My mind misgives me that there have been strange doings up at Netherglen to-night. But I'll know to-morrow."

It was at that very moment that Angela Vivian, going into the dressing-room, found a motionless, silent figure, sitting upright in the wheeled arm-chair, a figure, not lifeless, indeed, but with life apparent only in the agonised glance of the restless eyes, which seemed to plead for help. But no help could be given to her now. No more hard words could fall from those stricken lips: no more bitter sentences be written by those nerveless fingers. She might live for years, if dragging on a mute, maimed existence could be, indeed, called living; but, as far as power over the destiny of others, of doing good or harm to her loved ones, was concerned, Margaret Luttrell was practically dead!

Mr. Colquhoun heard the news of Mrs. Luttrell's seizure on the following morning, and made good use of it as a reproach to Dino in the conversation that he had with him. But Dino, although deeply grieved at the turn which things had taken, stood firm. He would have nothing to do with the Strathleckie or the Luttrell properties. Whereupon, Mr. Colquhoun went straight to Miss Murray, and told her, to the best of his ability, the long and intricate story. Be it observed that, although Mr. Colquhoun knew that Brian was living, and that he had lately been in England, he did not know of Brian's appearance at Strathleckie under the name of Stretton, and was, therefore, unable to give Elizabeth any information on this point.

Elizabeth was imperative in her decision.

"At any rate," she said, "the property cannot belong to me. It must belong either to Mr. Luttrell or to Mr. Vasari. I have no right to it."

"Possession is nine points of the law, my dear," said the lawyer. "Nobody can turn you out until Brian comes home again. It may be all a mistake."

"You don't think it a mistake, Mr. Colquhoun?"

Mr. Colquhoun smiled, pursed up his lips, and gave his head a little shake, as much as to say that he was not going to be tricked into any expression of his private opinions.

"The thing will be to get Mr. Brian Luttrell back," said Elizabeth.

"Not such an easy thing as it seems, I am afraid, Miss Murray. The lad, Dino Vasari, or whatever his name is, tried hard to keep him, but failed. He is an honest lad, I believe, this Dino, but he's an awful fool, you know, begging your pardon. If he wanted to keep Brian in England, why couldn't he write to me?"

"Perhaps he did not know of your friendship for Brian," said Elizabeth, smiling.

"Then he knew very little of Brian's life and Brian's friends, my dear, and, according to his own account, he knew a good deal. Of course, he is a foreigner, and we must make allowances for him, especially as he was brought up in a monastry, where I don't suppose they learn much about the forms of ordinary life. What puzzles me is the stupidity of one or two other people, who might have let me know in time, if they had had their wits about them. I've a crow to pluck with your Mr. Heron on that ground," concluded Mr. Colquhoun, never dreaming that he was making mischief by his communication.

Elizabeth started forward. "Percival!" she said, contracting her brows and looking at Mr. Colquhoun earnestly. "You don't mean that Percival knew!"

Mr. Colquhoun perceived that he had gone too far, but could not retract his words.

"Well, my dear Miss Murray, he certainly knew something——" and then he stopped short and coughed apologetically.

"Oh," said Elizabeth, with a little extra colour in her cheeks, and the faintest possible touch of coldness, "no doubt he had his reasons for being silent; he will explain them when he comes."

"No doubt," said the lawyer, gravely; but he chuckled a little to himself over the account which Mr. Brett had given him that morning of Mr. Heron's disappointment. (Mr. Brett had thrown up the case, he told his friend Colquhoun; would have nothing

more to do with it at any price. "I think the case has thrown you up," said Mr. Colquhoun, laughing slyly.)

He had taken up some papers which he had brought with him and was turning towards the door when a new thought caused him to stop, and address Elizabeth once more.

"Miss Murray," he said, "I do not wish to make a remark that would be unpleasant to you, but when I remember that Mr. Heron was in possession of the facts that I have just imparted to you, nearly a week ago, I do think, like yourself, that his conduct calls for an explanation."

"I did not say that I thought so, Mr. Colquhoun," said Elizabeth, feeling provoked. But Mr. Colquhoun was gone.

Nevertheless, she agreed with him so far that she sent off a telegram to Percival that afternoon. "Come to me at once, if possible. I want you."

When Percival received the message, which he did on his return from his club about eleven o'clock at night, he eyed the thin, pink paper on which it was written as if it had been a reptile of some poisonous kind. "I expected it," he said to himself, and all the gaiety went out of his face. "She has found something out."

It was too late to do anything that night. He felt resentfully conscious that he should not sleep if he went to bed; so he employed the midnight hours in completing some items of work which ought to be done on the following day. Before it was light he had packed a hand-bag, and departed to catch the early train. He sent a telegram from Peterborough to say that he was on the way.

Of course, it was late when he reached Strathleckie, and he assured himself with some complacency that Elizabeth would expect no conversation with him until next morning. But he was a little mistaken. In her quality of mistress, she had chosen to send everyone else to bed: the household was so well accustomed to Percival's erratic comings and goings, that nobody attached any importance to his visits; and even old Mr. Heron appeared only for a few minutes to gossip with his son while he ate a comfortable supper, retiring at last, with a nod to his niece which Percival easily understood. It meant—"I will do now what you told me you wished—leave you together to have your talk out." And Percival felt irritated by Elizabeth's determination.

"Will you smoke?" she asked, when the meal was over.

"I don't mind if I do. Will you come into the study—that's the smoking-room, is it not?—or is it too late for you?"

"It is not very late," said Elizabeth.

When they were seated in the study, Percival in a great green arm-chair, and Elizabeth opposite to him in a much smaller one, he attempted to take matters somewhat into his own hands.

"I won't ask to-night what you wanted me for," he said, easily. "I am rather battered and sleepy; we shall talk better to-morrow."

"You can set my mind at rest on one point, at any rate," rejoined Elizabeth, whose face burned with a feverish-looking flush. "It is, of course, a mistake that you knew a week ago of Brian Luttrell being in London?"

"Oh, of course," said Percival. But the irony in his voice was too plain for her to be deceived by it.

"Did you know, Percival?"

"Well, if you must have the plain truth," he said, sitting up and examining the end of his cigar with much attention, "I did."

She was silent. He raised his eyes, apparently with some effort, to her face; saw there a rather shocked and startled look, and rushed immediately into vehement speech.

"What if I did! Do you expect me to rush to you with every disturbing report I hear? I did not see this man, Brian Luttrell; I should not know him if I did—as Brian Luttrell, at any rate. I merely heard the story from a—an acquaintance of mine——"

"Dino Vasari," said Elizabeth.

"Oh, I see you know the facts. There is no need for me to say any more. Of course, you attach no weight to any reasons I might have for silence."

"Indeed, I do, Percival; or I should do, if I knew what they were."

"Can you not guess them?" he said, looking at her intently. "Can you think of no powerful motive that would make me anxious to delay the telling of the story?"

"None," she said. "None, except one that would be beneath you."

"Beneath me? Is it possible?" scoffed Percival. "No motive is too base for me, allow me to tell you, my dear child. I am the true designing villain of romance. Go on: what is the one bad motive which you attribute to me?"

"I do not attribute it to you," said Elizabeth, slowly, but with some indignation. "I never in my life believed, I never shall believe, that you cared in the least whether I was rich or poor."

Percival paused, as if he had met with an unexpected check, and then went off into a fit of rather forced laughter.

"So you never thought that," he said. "And that was the only motive that occurred to you? Then, perhaps you will kindly tell me the story as it was told to you, for you seem

to have had a special edition. Has Dino Vasari been down here?"

She gave him a short account of the events that had occurred at Netherglen, and she noticed that as he listened, he forgot to smoke his cigar, and that he leaned his elbow on the arm of the great chair, and shaded his eyes with his hand. There was a certain suppressed eagerness in his manner, as he turned round when she had finished, and said, with lifted eyebrows:—

"Is that all?"

"What else do you know?" said Elizabeth.

He rubbed his hand impatiently backwards and forwards on the arm of the chair, and did not speak for a moment.

"What does Colquhoun advise you to do?" he asked, presently.

"To wait here until Brian Luttrell is found and brought home."

"Brought home. They think he will come?"

"Oh, yes. Why not? When everybody knows that he is alive there will be no possible reason why he should stay away. In fact, if he is a right-thinking man, he will see that justice requires him to come home at once."

"I should not think, myself, that he was a right-thinking man," said Percival, without looking at her.

"Because he allowed himself to be thought dead?" said Elizabeth, watching him as he relighted his cigar. "But, then, he was in such terrible trouble—and the opportunity offered itself, and seemed so easy. Poor fellow! I was always very sorry for him."

"Were you?"

"Yes. His mother, at least, Mrs. Luttrell, for I suppose she is not his mother really, must have been very cruel. From all that I have heard he was the last man to be jealous of his brother, or to wish any harm to him."

"In short, you are quite prepared to look upon him as a *héros de roman*, and worship him as such when he appears. Possibly you may think there is some reason in Dino Vasari's naive suggestion that you should marry Mr. Luttrell and prevent any division of the property."

"A suggestion which, from you, Percival, is far more insulting than that of the motive which I did not attribute to you," said Elizabeth, with spirit.

"You wouldn't marry Brian Luttrell, then?"

"Percival!"

"Not under any consideration? Well, tell me so. I like to hear you say it."

Elizabeth was silent.

"Tell me so," he said, stretching out his hand to her, and looking at her attentively, "and I will tell you the reason of my week's silence."

"I have no need to tell you so," she answered, in a suppressed voice. "And if I did you would not trust me."

"No," he said, drily, "perhaps not; but promise me, all the same, that under no circumstances will you ever marry Brian Luttrell."

"I promise," she said, in a low tone of humiliation. Her eyes were full of tears. "And now let me go, Percival. I cannot stay with you—when you say that you trust me so little."

He had taken advantage of her rising to seize her hand. He now tossed his cigar into the fire, and rose, too, still holding her hand in his. He looked down at her quivering lips, her tear-filled eyes, with gathering intensity of emotion. Then he put both arms round her, pressed her to his breast with passionate vehemence, and kissed her again and again, on cheek, lip, neck, and brow. She shivered a little, but did not protest.

"There!" he said, suddenly putting her away from him, and standing erect with the black frowning line very strongly marked upon his forehead. "I will tell you now why I did not try to keep Brian Luttrell in England. I knew that I ought to make a row about it. I knew that I was bound in honour to write to Colquhoun, to you, to Mrs. Luttrell, to any of the people concerned. And I didn't do it. I didn't precisely mean not to do it, but I wanted to shift the responsibility. I thought it was other people's business to keep him in England: not mine. As a matter of fact, I suppose it was mine. What do you say?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth, lifting her lovely, grieved eyes to his stormy face. "I think it was partly yours."

"Well, I didn't do it, you see," said Percival. "I was a brute and a cad, I suppose. But it seemed fatally easy to hold one's tongue. And now he has gone to America."

"But he can be brought back again, Percival."

"If he will come. I fancy that it will take a strong rope to drag him back. You want to know the reason for my silence? It isn't far to seek. Brian Luttrell and the tutor, Stretton, who fell in love with you, were one and the same person. That's all."

And then he walked straight out of the room, and left her to her own reflections.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PERCIVAL'S ATONEMENT.

PERCIVAL felt a decided dread of his next meeting with Elizabeth. He could not guess what would be the effect of his information

upon her mind, nor what would be her opinion of his conduct. He was in a state of exasperating uncertainty about her views. The only thing of which he was sure was her love and respect for truthfulness; he did not know whether she would ever forgive any lapse from it. "Though, if it comes to that," he said to himself, as he finished his morning toilet, "she ought to be as angry with Stretton as she is with me; for he took her in completely, and, as for me, I only held my tongue. I suppose she will say that 'the motive was everything.' Which confirms me in my belief that one man may steal a horse, while the other may not look over the wall." And then he went down to breakfast.

He was late, of course; when was he not late for breakfast? The whole family-party had assembled; even Mrs. Heron was downstairs to welcome her step-son. Percival responded curtly enough to their greetings; his eyes and ears and thoughts were too much taken up with Elizabeth to be bestowed on the rest of the family. And Elizabeth, after all, looked much as usual. Perhaps there was a little unwonted colour in her cheek, and life in her eye; she did not look as if she had not slept, or had had bad dreams; there was rather an unusually restful and calm expression upon her face.

"Confound the fellow!"—thus Percival mentally apostrophised the missing Brian Luttrell. "One would think that she was glad of what I told her." He was thoroughly put out by this reflection, and munched his breakfast in sulky silence, listening cynically to his stepmother's idle utterances and Kitty's vivacious replies. He was conscious of some disinclination to meet Elizabeth's tranquil glance, of which he bitterly resented the tranquillity. And she scarcely spoke, except to the children.

"I wonder how poor Mrs. Luttrell is to-day," Isabel Heron was saying. "It is sad that she should be so ill."

"Yes, I wondered yesterday what was the matter, when I met Hugo," said Kitty. "He looked quite pale and serious. He was staying at Dunmuir, he told me. I suppose he does not find the house comfortable while his aunt is ill."

"Rather a cold-blooded young fellow, if he can consider that," said Mr. Heron. "Mrs. Luttrell has always been very kind to him, I believe."

"Perhaps he is tired of Netherglen," said Kitty. ("Nobody knows anything about the story of the two Brian Luttrells, then!" Percival reflected, with surprise. "Elizabeth has a talent for silence when she chooses.") Kitty went on carelessly "Netherglen is damp in this weather. I don't think I should

care to live there." Then she blushed a little, as though some new thought had occurred to her.

"The weather is growing quite autumnal," said Mrs. Heron, languidly. "We ought to return to town, and make our preparations——" She looked with a sly smile from Percival to Elizabeth, and paused. "When is it to be, Lizzie?"

Elizabeth drew up her head haughtily and said nothing. Percival glanced at her, and drew no good augury from the cold offence visible in her face. There was an awkward silence, which Mrs. Heron thought it better to dispel by rising from the table.

Percival smoked his morning cigar on the terrace with his father, and wondered whether Elizabeth was not going to present herself and talk to him. He was ready to be very penitent and make every possible sign of submission to her wishes, for he felt that he had wronged her in his mind, and that she might justly be offended with him if she guessed his thoughts. He paced up and down, looking in impatiently at the windows from time to time, but still she came not. At last, standing disconsolately in the porch, he saw her passing through the hall with little Jack in her arms, and the other boys hanging on to her dress, quite in the old Gower-street fashion.

"Elizabeth, won't you come out?" he said.

"I can't, just now. I am going to give the children some lessons. I do that, first thing."

"Always?"

"Ever since Mr. Stretton left," she said.

"Give them a holiday. I want you. There are lots of things we have to talk about."

"Are there? I thought there was nothing left to say," said she, sweetly but coldly. "But I am going to Dunmuir at half-past two this afternoon, and you can drive down with me if you like."

She passed on, and shut herself into the study with the children. Percival felt injured. "She should not have brought me all the way from London if she had nothing to say," he grumbled. "I'll go back to-night. And I might as well go and see Colquhoun this morning."

He went down to Mr. Colquhoun's office, and was not received very cordially by that gentleman. The interview resulted in rather a violent quarrel, which ended by Percival being requested to leave Mr. Colquhoun's presence, and not return to it uninvited. Mr. Colquhoun could not easily forgive him for neglecting to inform the Luttrells, at the earliest opportunity, of Brian's reappearance. "We should have saved time,

money, anxiety: we might have settled the matter without troubling Miss Murray, or agitating Mrs. Luttrell; and I call it downright dishonesty to have concealed a fact which was of such vital importance," said Mr. Colquhoun, who had lost his temper. And Percival flung himself out of the room in a rage.

He was still inwardly fuming when he seated himself beside Elizabeth that afternoon in a little low carriage drawn by two grey ponies—an equipage which she specially affected—in order to drive to Dunmuir. For full five minutes neither of them spoke, but at last Elizabeth said, with a faint accent of surprise:—

"I thought you had something to say to me."

"I have so many things that I don't know where to begin. Have you nothing to say—about what I told you last night?"

"I can only say that I am very glad of it."

"The deuce you are!" thought Percival, but his lips were sealed. Elizabeth went on to explain herself.

"I am glad, because now I understand various things that were very hard for me to understand before. I can see why Mr. Stretton hesitated about coming here; I see why he was startled when he discovered that I was the very girl whom he must have heard of before he left England. Of course, I should never have objected to surrender the property to its rightful owner; but in this case I shall be not only willing but pleased to give it back."

Her tone was proud and independent. Percival did not like it, but would not say so.

"I was saying last night," she continued, "that Brian Luttrell must come back. This discovery makes his return all the more necessary. I am going now to ask Mr. Colquhoun what steps had better be taken for bringing him home."

"Do you think he will come?"

"He must come. He must be made to see that it is right for him to come. I have been thinking of what I will ask Mr. Colquhoun to say to him. If he remembers me"—and her voice sank a little—"he will not refuse to do what would so greatly lighten my burden."

"Better write yourself, Elizabeth," said Percival, in a sad yet cynical tone. "You can doubtless say what would bring him back by the next steamer."

She made no answer, but set her lips a little more firmly, and gave one of the grey ponies a slight touch with the whip. It was the silence that caused Percival to see that she was wounded.

"I have a knack of saying what I don't mean," he remarked, rousing himself. "I beg your pardon for this and every other rude speech that I may make, Elizabeth; and ask you to understand that I am only translating my discontent with myself into words when I am ill-tempered. Have a little mercy on me, for pity's sake."

She smiled. He thought there was some mockery in the smile.

"What are you laughing at?" he said, abruptly, dropping the apologetic tone.

"I am not laughing. I was wondering that you thought it worth while to excuse yourself for such a trifle as a rude word or two. I thought possibly, when I came out with you, that you had other apologies to make."

"May I ask what you mean?"

"I mean that, by your own showing, you have not been quite straightforward," said Elizabeth, plainly. "And I thought that you might have something to say about it."

"Not straightforward!" he repeated. It was not often that his cheeks tingled as they tingled now. "What have I done to make you call me not straightforward, pray?"

"You knew that I inherited this property because of Brian Luttrell's death. You knew—did you not?—that he had only a few days to spend in London, and that he meant to start for America this week. You must have known that some fresh arrangement was necessary before I could honestly enjoy any of his money—that, in fact, he ought to have it all. And, unless he himself confided in you under a promise of secrecy, or anything of that sort, I think you ought to have written to Mr. Colquhoun at once."

"He did not confide in me: I did not see him. It was Dino Vasari who sought me out and told me," said Percival, with some anger.

"And did Dino Vasari intend you to keep the matter a secret?"

"No. The real fact was, Elizabeth, that I did not altogether believe Vasari's story. I did not in the least believe that Brian Luttrell was living. I thought it was a hoax. Upon my word, I am half-inclined to believe so still. I thought it was not worth while to take the trouble."

"You did not know where to find him, I suppose?"

"Well—yes; I had the address."

"And you did nothing?" she said, flashing upon him a look of indignant surprise.

"I did nothing," returned Percival.

"That is what I complain of," she remarked, shortly.

For some time she drove on in silence, lightly flicking her ponies' heads from time to time with her whip, her face set steadily towards the road before her, her strong, well-gloved hands showing determination in the very way she held the whip and reins. Percival grew savage, and then defiant.

"You ask too much," he said, pulling his long moustache, and uttering a bitter laugh. "It would have been easy and natural enough to move Heaven and earth for the sake of Brian Luttrell's rights, if Brian Luttrell had not constituted himself my rival in another domain. But when his 'rights' meant depriving you of your property, and placing Mr. Stretton in authority—I decline."

"I call that mean and base," said Elizabeth, giving the words a low but clear-toned emphasis, which made Percival wince.

"Thank you," he said. And there was another long silence, which lasted until they drew up at Mr. Colquhoun's door.

Percival waited for nearly an hour before she came back, and had time to go through every possible phase of anger and mortification. He felt that he had more reason on his side than Elizabeth could understand: the doubt of Dino's good faith, which seemed so small to her, had certainly influenced him very strongly. No doubt it would have been better—wiser—if he had tried to find out the truth of Dino's story; but the sting of Elizabeth's judgment lay in the fact that he had fervently hoped that Dino's story was not true, and that he had refused to meet Dino's offer half-way, the offer that would have secured Elizabeth's own happiness. Would she ever hear a full account of that interview? And what would she think of his selfishness if she came to know it? Ever since that conversation in Mr. Brett's office Percival had been conscious of bitter possibilities of evil in his own soul. He had had a bad time of it during the past week, and, when he contrasted his own conduct with the generous candour and uprightness that Elizabeth seemed to expect from him, he was open to confess to himself that he fell very short of her standard.

She came back to her place attended by Mr. Colquhoun, who wrapped her rugs about her in a fatherly way, and took not the slightest notice of Mr. Percival Heron. She had some small purchases to make in the town, and it was growing almost dusk before they turned homewards. Then she began to speak in her ordinary tone.

"Mr. Colquhoun has been telling me what to do," she said, "and I think that he is right. Dino Vasari has already gone back to Italy, but before he went, he signed a paper relinquishing all claim to the property in favour of Brian Luttrell and myself. Mr. Colquhoun says it was a useless thing to do, except as it

shows his generosity and kindness of heart, and that it would not be valid in a court at all; but that nothing further can be done, as he does not press his claim, until Brian Luttrell comes back to England or writes instructions. There might be a friendly suit when he came; but that would be left for him (and, I suppose, myself) to decide. When he comes we shall try to get Dino Vasari back, and have a friendly consultation over the matter. I don't see why we need have lawyers to interfere at all. I should resign the property with a very good grace, but Mr. Colquhoun thinks that Mr. Luttrell will have scruples."

"He ought to have," muttered Percival, but Elizabeth took no notice.

"It seems that he went in a sailing vessel," she went on, in a perfectly calm and collected voice, "because he could get a very cheap passage in that way. Mr. Colquhoun proposes that we should write to Pernambuco; but he might not be expecting any letters—he might miss them—and go up the country; there is no knowing. I think that a responsible, intelligent person ought to be sent out by a fast steamer and wait for him at Pernambuco. Then everything would be satisfactorily explained and enforced—better than by letter. Mr. Colquhoun says he feels inclined to go himself."

She gave a soft, pleased laugh as she said the words; but there was excitement and trouble underneath its apparent lightness. "That, of course, would never do; but he has a clerk whom he can thoroughly trust, and he will start next week for the Brazils."

Percival sat mute. Had she no idea that he was suffering? She went on quickly.

"Mr. Salt—that is the clerk's name—will reach Pernambuco many days before the sailing vessel; but it is better that he should be too early than too late. They may even pass the *Falcon*—that is the name of Mr. Luttrell's ship—on the way. The worst is"—and here her voice began to tremble—"that Mr. Colquhoun has heard a report that the *Falcon* was not—not—quite—sea-worthy."

She put up one gloved hand and dashed a tear from her eyes. Percival's silence exasperated her. For almost the first time she turned upon him with a reproach.

"Will you remember," she said, bitterly, "if his ship goes to the bottom, that you might have stopped him, and—did not think it worth while to take the trouble?"

"Good God, Elizabeth, how unjust you are!" cried Percival, impetuously.

Elizabeth did not answer. She had to put up her hand again

and again to wipe away her tears. The strain of self-control had been a severe one, and when it once slipped away from her the emotion had to have its own way. Percival tried to take the reins from her, but this she would not allow; and they were going uphill on a quiet sheltered road of which the ponies knew every step as well as he did himself.

When she was calmer, he broke the silence by saying in an oddly-muffled, hoarse voice:—

"It is no use going on like this. I suppose you wish our engagement to be broken off?"

"If" said Elizabeth.

"Yes, you. Can't I see that you care more for this man Stretton or Luttrell than you care for me? I don't want my wife to be always sighing after another man."

"That you would not have," she said, coldly.

"I don't care. I know now what you feel. And if Stretton comes back, I suppose I must go to the wall."

"I will keep my word to you if you like," said Elizabeth, after a moment's pause. She could not speak more graciously. "I did not think of breaking off the engagement: I thought that matter was decided."

"You called me mean and base just now, and you expect me to put up with it. You think me a low, selfish brute. I may be all that, and not want you to tell me so." Some of Percival's sense of humour—a little more grim than usual—was perceptible in the last few words.

"I am sorry if I told you so. I will not tell you so again."

"But you will feel it."

"If you are low and base and mean, of course, I shall feel it," said Elizabeth, incisively. "It rests with you to show me that you are not what you say."

Percival found no word to answer. They were near Strathleckie by this time, and turned in at the gates without the exchange of another sentence.

Elizabeth expected him to insist upon going back to London that night, or, at least, early next morning, but he did not propose to do so. He hung about the place next day, smoking, and speaking little, with a certain yellowness of tint in his complexion, which denoted physical as well as mental disturbance. In the afternoon he went to Dunmuir, and was away for some hours; and more than one telegram arrived for him in the course of the day, exciting Mrs. Heron's fears lest something should have "gone wrong" with his business affairs in London. But he assured her, on his return, with his usual impatient frown, that everything was going exactly as he would like it to do. It was

with one of the telegraphic despatches crushed up in his hand, that he came to Elizabeth as she sat in the drawing-room after dinner, and said, with a little paleness visible about his lips :—

"Can I speak to you for a few moments alone?"

She looked up, startled; then rose and led the way to an inner drawing-room, where they would be undisturbed. She seated herself in the chair, which, with unwonted ceremoniousness, he wheeled forward for her; but he himself stood on the hearthrug, twisting and untwisting the paper in his hand, as if—extraordinary occurrence!—as if he were actually nervous.

"I have a proposition to make to you," he said. He uttered his words very rapidly, but made long pauses between some of the sentences. "You say that Mr. Colquhoun is going to send out his clerk, Salt, to stop Brian Luttrell when he lands at Pernambuco. I have just seen Mr. Colquhoun, and he agrees with me that this proceeding is of very doubtful utility. . . Now, don't interrupt me, I beg. If I throw cold water on this plan, it is only that I may suggest another which I think better. . . Salt is a mere clerk: we cannot tell him all the circumstances, and the aguments that he will use will probably be such as a man like Luttrell will despise. I mean that he will put it on the ground of Luttrell's own interests—not Dino Vasari's, or—or yours. . . What I propose is that someone should go who knows the story intimately, who knows the relations of all the parties. . . If you like to trust me, I will do my best to bring Brian Luttrell home again."

"You!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "Oh, Percival, no."

"And why not? I assure you I will act carefully, and I am sure I shall succeed. I have even persuaded Mr. Colquhoun of my good intentions—with some difficulty, I confess. Here is a note from him to you. He read it to me after writing it, and I know what he advises you to do."

Elizabeth read the note. It consisted only of these words: "If you can make up your mind to let Mr. Percival Heron go in Salt's place, I think it would be the better plan.—J. C."

"I'll be on my good behaviour, I promise you," said Percival, watching her, with a lightness of tone which was rather belied by the mournful expression of his eyes. "I'll play no tricks, either with him or myself; and bring him safely back to Scotland—on my honour, I will. Do you distrust me so much, Elizabeth?"

"Oh, no, no. Would it not be painful to you? I thought—you did not like Mr. Luttrell." She spoke with great hesitation.

Percival made a grimace. "I don't say that I do like him. I mean to say that I want to show you—and myself—that I do—a little bit—regret my silence, and will try my best to remedy the

mischief caused by it. A frank confession which ought to please you."

"It does please me. I am sure of it. But you must not go—you must not leave your work——"

"Oh, my work can be easily done by somebody else. That is what this telegram is about, by-the-bye. I must send an answer, and it depends upon your decision."

"Can I not consult any one? My uncle? Mr. Colquhoun?"

"You know Mr. Colquhoun's opinion. My father will think exactly as you and I do. No, it depends entirely upon whether you think I shall do your errand well, Elizabeth, and whether you will give me the chance of showing that I am not so ungenerous and so base as you say you think me. Tell me to fetch Brian Luttrell home again, and I will go."

And, with tears in her eyes, Elizabeth said, "Go."

CHAPTER XXXV.

DINO'S HOME-COMING.

"It is to be understood," said Percival, two or three days later, with an affectation of great precision, "that I surrender none of my rights by going on this wild-goose chase. I shall come back in a few months' time to claim my bride."

Elizabeth smiled rather sadly. "Very well," she said.

"In fact," Percival went on expansively, "I shall expect the wedding to be arranged for the day after my arrival, whenever that takes place. So get your white gown and lace veil ready, and we will have Brian Luttrell as best man, and Dino Vasari to give you away."

It was rather cruel jesting, thought Elizabeth; but then Percival was in the habit, when he was in a good humour, of turning his deepest feelings into jest. The submission with which she listened to him, roused him after a time to a perception that his words were somewhat painful to her; and he relapsed into a silence which he broke by saying in an entirely different sort of voice:—

"Have you no message for Brian Luttrell, Elizabeth?"

"You know all that I want to say."

"But is there nothing else? No special message of remembrance and friendship?"

"Tell him," said Elizabeth, flushing and then paling again, "that I shall not be happy until he comes back and takes what is his own."

"Well, I can't say anything much stronger," said Percival, drily. "I will remember."

They talked no more about themselves, until the day on which he was to start, and then, when he was about to take his leave of her, he said, in a very low voice:—

"Do you mean to be true to me or not when Luttrell comes home, Elizabeth?"

"I shall keep my word to you, Percival. Oh, don't—don't—say that to me again!" she cried, bursting into tears, as she saw the lurking doubt that so constantly haunted his mind.

"I won't," he said. "I will never say it again if you tell me that you trust me as I trust you."

"I do trust you."

"And I am not so base and mean as you said I was?"

For, perhaps, the first time in her life, she kissed him of her own accord. It was with this kiss burning upon his lips that Percival leaned out of the window of the railway-carriage as the train steamed away into the darkness, and waved a last farewell to the woman he loved.

He had been rather imperious and masterful during the last few days; he felt conscious of it now, and was half-sorry for it. It had seemed to him that, if he did this thing for Brian Luttrell, he had at least the right to some reward. And he claimed his reward beforehand, in the shape of close companionship and gentle words from Elizabeth. He did not compel her to kiss him—he remembered his magnanimity in that respect with some complacency—but he had demanded many other signs of good-fellowship. And she had seemed ready enough to render them. She had wanted to go with him and Mr. Heron to London, and help him to prepare for the voyage. But he would not allow her to leave Strathleckie. He had only a couple of days to spare, and he should be hurried and busy. He preferred saying good-bye to her at Dunmuir.

The reason of his going was kept a profound secret from all the Herons except the father, who gave his consent to the plan cordially, though with some surprise.

"But what will become of your profession?" he had asked of Percival. "Won't three or four months' absence put you sadly out of the running?"

"You forget my prospects," Percival replied, with his ready, cynical laugh. "When I've squared the matter with Brian Luttrell, and married Elizabeth, I shall have no need to think of my profession." Mr. Heron shifted his eye-glasses on his nose uneasily, and screwed up his face into an expression of mild disapproval, but couldn't think of any suitable reply. "Besides," said Percival, "I've got a commission to do some papers on Brazilian life. The *Evening Mail* will take them. And I am

going to write a book on 'Modern Morality' as I go out. I fully expect to make my literary work pay my travelling expenses, sir."

"I thought Elizabeth paid those," said Mr. Heron, in a hesitating sort of way.

"Well, she thinks she will do so," said Percival, "and that's all she need know about the matter."

Mr. Colquhoun, to whom Elizabeth had gone for advice on the day after Percival's proposition, was very cautious in what he said to her. "It's the best plan in the world," he remarked, "in one way."

"In what way?" asked Elizabeth, anxiously.

"Well, Mr. Heron goes as your affianced husband, does he not? Of course, he can represent your interests better than anybody else."

"I thought he was going to prevent my interests from being too well represented," said Elizabeth, half-smiling. "I want him to make Mr. Luttrell understand that I have no desire to keep the property at all."

"There is one drawback," said Mr. Colquhoun, "and one that I don't see how Mr. Heron will get over. He has never seen Brian, has he? How will he recognise him? For the lad's probably gone under another name. It's just a wild-goose chase that he's starting upon, I'm afraid."

"They have seen each other."

"Mr. Heron didn't tell me that. And where was it they saw each other, Miss Murray?"

"In Italy—and here. Here at Strathleckie. Oh, Mr. Colquhoun, it was Brian Luttrell who came with us as the boys' tutor, and we did not know. He called himself Stretton." And then Elizabeth shed a small tear or two, although she did not exactly know why.

Mr. Colquhoun's wrath and astonishment were not to be described. That Brian should have been so near him, and that they should have never met! "I should have known him anywhere!" cried the old man. "Grey hair! do you tell me? What difference does that make to a man that knew him all his life, and his father before him? And a beard, you say? Toots! beard or no beard, I should have known Brian Luttrell anywhere."

Angela Vivian, being taken into their confidence, supplied them with several photographs of Brian in his earlier days. And Percival was admitted to Netherglen to look at a portrait of the brothers (or reputed brothers), painted not long before Richard's death. He looked at it long and carefully, but acknowledged afterwards that he could not see any likeness between his

memories of Mr. Stretton and the pictured face, with its fine contour, brown moustache, and smiling eyes, a face in which an expression of slight melancholy seemed to be the index to intense susceptibility of temperament and great refinement of mind. "The eyes are like Stretton's," he said, "and that is all." He took two of the photographs with him, however, as part of his equipment.

Mrs. Luttrell continued in the state in which she had been found after her interview with Dino. She could not speak: she could not move: her eyes had an awful consciousness in them which told that she was living and knew what was going on around her: otherwise she might easily have been mistaken for one already dead. It was difficult to imagine that she understood the words spoken in her presence, and for some time her attendants did not realise this fact, and spoke with less caution than they might have done respecting the affairs of the neighbourhood. But when the doctor had declared that her mind was unimpaired, Mr. Colquhoun thought it better to come and give her some account of the things that had been done during her illness, on the mere chance that she might hear and understand. He told her that Dino had gone to Italy, that Brian had sailed for South America, and that Percival Heron had gone to fetch him back, in order to make some arrangement about the property which Elizabeth Murray wished to give up to him. He thought that there was a look of relief in her eyes when he had finished; but he could not be sure.

Hugo, after staying for some days at the hotel in Dunmuir, ventured rather timidly back to Netherglen. Now that Dino was out of the way, he did not see why he should not make use of his opportunities. He entered the door of his old home, it was true, with a sort of superstitious terror upon him: Dino had obtained a remarkable power over his mind, and if he had been either in England or Scotland, Hugo would never have dared to present himself at Netherglen. But his acquaintances and friends—even Angela—thought his absence so strange, that he was encouraged to pay a call at his aunt's house, and when there, he was led, almost against his will, straight into her presence. He had heard that she could not speak or move; but he was hardly prepared for the spectacle of complete helplessness that met his gaze. There might be dread and loathing in the eyes that looked at him out of that impassive face; but there was no possibility of the utterance by word of mouth. An eternal silence seemed to have fallen upon Margaret Luttrell: her bitterest enemy might come and go before her, and against none of his devices could she protect herself.

While looking at her, a thought flashed across Hugo's mind, and matured itself later in the day into a complete plan of action. He remembered the will that Mrs. Luttrell had made in his favour. Had that will ever been signed? By the curious brusqueness with which Mr. Colquhoun had lately treated him, he fancied that it had. If it was signed, he was the heir; he would be the master ultimately of Netherglen. Why should he go away? Dino Vasari had ordered him never to come again into Mrs. Luttrell's presence; but Dino Vasari was now shut up in some Italian monastery, and was not likely to hear very much about the affairs of a remote country-house in Scotland. At any rate, when Mrs. Luttrell was dead, even Dino could not object to Hugo's taking possession of his own house. When Mrs. Luttrell was dead! And when would she die?

The doctor, whom Hugo consulted with great professions of affection for his aunt, gave little hope of long life for her. He wondered, he said, that she had survived the stroke that deprived her of speech and the use of her limbs: a few weeks or months, in his opinion, would see the end.

Hugo considered the situation very seriously. It would be better for him to stay at Netherglen, where he could ascertain his aunt's condition from time to time, and be sure that there were no signs of returning speech and muscular power. Dared he risk disobedience to Dino's command? On deliberation, he thought he dare. Dino could prove nothing against him: it would be assertion against assertion, that was all. And most people would look on the accusations that Dino would bring as positive slander. Hugo felt that his greatest danger lay in his own cowardice—his absence of self-control and superstitious fear of Dino's eye. But if the young monk were out of England there was no present reason to be afraid. And when such a piece of luck had occurred as Mrs. Luttrell's paralytic stroke seemed likely to prove to Hugo, it would be folly to take no advantage of it. Hugo had had one or two wonderful strokes of luck in his life; but he told himself that this was the greatest of all. He was rather inclined to attribute it to his possession of a medal which had been blessed by the Pope (for, as far as he had any religion at all, Hugo was still a Romanist), which his mother had hung round his neck whilst he was a chubby-faced boy in Sicily. He wore it still, and was not at all above considering it as a charm for ensuring him a larger slice of good fortune than would otherwise have fallen to his share. And, therefore, in a few days after Mrs. Luttrell's seizure, Hugo was once again at Netherglen, ruling even more openly and imperiously than he had done in the days of his aunt's health and

strength. His presence there, and Mrs. Luttrell's helplessness, caused some of Angela Vivian's friends to object seriously to her continued residence at Netherglen. She was still a young woman of considerable beauty; and Hugo was two-and-twenty. Of what use could she be to Mrs. Luttrell? She ought, at any rate, to have an older friend to chaperone her, to be with her in her walks and drives, and be present at the meals which she and Hugo now shared alone. Angela took little notice of the remonstrance of aunts and cousins, but when she heard that her brother Rupert was coming to stay at the Herons, and proposed to spend a day or two at Netherglen on his way thither, she felt a qualm of fear. Rupert was very careful of his sister: she felt sure that she would never be permitted to do what he thought in the least degree unbecoming.

Meanwhile, the man who had resolved to be known as Dino Vasari for his life-time—or at least until he laid down his name, together with his will, his affections, and all his other possessions at the door of the religious house which he desired to enter, was hastening towards his old home, his birthplace, (whether he was Dino Vasari or Brian Luttrell) under sunny Italian skies. He did not quite dare to think how he should be received. He had thwarted the plans of the far-seeing monks: he had made their anxious efforts for his welfare of no avail. He had thrown away the chance of an inheritance which might have been used for the benefit of his Church: would the rulers of that Church easily forgive him?

He reached San Stefano at night, and took up his quarters at the inn, whence he wrote a letter to the Prior, asking to be allowed to see him, and hinting at his wish to enter the monastery for life. Perhaps the humility of the tone of his epistle made Father Cristoforo suspect that something was wrong. To begin with, Dino was not supposed to act without the advice of those who had hitherto been his guardians, and he had committed an act of grave insubordination in leaving England without their permission. The priest to whom he had reported himself on his arrival in London, had already complained to Father Cristoforo of the young man's self-reliant spirit, and a further letter had given some account of "very unsatisfactory proceedings" on Dino's part—of a refusal to tell where he had been or what he had been doing, and, finally, of his sudden and unauthorised departure from British shores. This letter had not tended to put Father Cristoforo into charity with his late pupil—child of the house, as, in a certain sense, he had been for many years, and special pet and favourite with the Prior—he was rather inclined to order Dino back to England without loss of time. Padre Cristoforo set

a high value upon that inheritance in Scotland. He wished to secure it for Dino—still more for the Church.

He sent back a curt verbal answer. Dino might come to the cloisters on the following morning after early mass. The Prior would meet him there as he came from the monastery chapel.

Dino was waiting at the appointed hour. In spite of the displeasure implied in Padre Cristoforo's message, his heart was swelling with delight at the sight of the well-known Italian hills, at the sunshine and the sweet scents that came to him with the crystal clearness of the Italian atmosphere. He loved the white walls of the monastery, the vine-clad slopes and olive groves around it, the glimpses of purple sea which one caught from time to time in the openings left in the chestnut-woods, where he had wandered so often when he was a boy. These things were dear to Dino: he had loved them all his life, and it was a veritable home-coming to him when he presented himself at San Stefano.

And yet the home-coming would not be without its peculiar trials. Never once had Father Cristoforo been seriously angry with him, and the habit of obedience, of almost filial reverence, reviving in Dino's heart as he approached the monastery precincts, made him think with some awe of the severity which the Prior's face had sometimes shown to impenitent culprits. Was he impenitent? He did not know. Was he afraid? No, Dino assured himself, looking up to the purple mountains and the cloudless sky, with a grave smile of recognition and profound content, he was afraid of nothing now.

He waited until the service was over. The peal of the organ, the sound of the monks' chant, reached him where he stood, but he did not enter the little chapel. A sense of unworthiness came over him. As the short, sharp stroke of the bell smote upon his ear, he fell upon his knees, and rested his forehead against the wall. Old words of prayer rose familiarly to his lips. He remembered his sins of omission and commission—venial faults they would seem to many of us, but black and heinous in pure-hearted Dino's eyes—and pleaded passionately for their forgiveness. And then the words turned into a prayer for the welfare of his friend Brian and the woman that Brian loved. Dino was one of those rare souls who love their neighbour better than themselves.

The Prior quitted the chapel at last, and approached his former pupil. He did not come alone, but the brothers who followed him kept at some little distance. Some of the other occupants of the monastery—monks, lay-brothers, pupils—occasionally passed by, but they did not even lift their eyes. Still, there was a certain

sense of publicity about the interview which made Dino feel that he was not to be welcomed—only judged.

Father Cristoforo's face was terrible in its very impassiveness. There was no trace of emotion in those rigidly-set features and piercing eyes. He looked at Dino for some minutes before he spoke. The young man retained his kneeling posture until the Prior said, briefly —

"Rise.

Dino stood up immediately, with folded arms and bowed head It was not his part to speak till he was questioned.

"You left England without permission," said the Prior in a dry tone, rather of assertion than of inquiry."

"Reverend Father, yes."

"Why?"

"There was no reason for me to stay in England. The estate is not mine."

"Who says it is not?"

"Reverend Father, I cannot take it away from those to whom it now belongs," said Dino, faltering, and growing red and white by turns.

The Prior looked at him with an examining eye. In spite of his apparent coldness, he was shocked by the change that he perceived in his old pupil's bearing and appearance. The finely-cut face was wasted; there were hollows in the temples and the cheeks the dew of perspiration upon the forehead marked physical weakness as well as agitation. There was more kindness in the Prior's manner as he said:—

"You felt, perhaps, the need of rest? The English winds are keen. You came to recruit yourself before going back to fight your cause in a court of law? You wanted help and counsel?"

Dino's head sank lower upon his breast: he breathed quickly, and did not speak.

"Had you not proof sufficient? I sent all necessary papers by a trusty messenger. You received them?"

"Yes." Dino's voice had sunk to a hoarse whisper.

"You have them with you?"

Dino flashed one look of appeal into the Prior's face, and then sank on his knees. "Father," he said, desperately, "I have not done as you commanded me. I could not fight this cause. I could not turn them out of their inheritance--their home. I destroyed all the papers. There is no proof left."

In spite of his self-possession the Prior started. Of this contingency he had certainly never thought. He came a step nearer to the young man, and spoke with astonished urgency.

"You destroyed the proofs? You? Every one of them?"

"Every one."

A sudden white change passed over Padre Cristoforo's face. His lips locked themselves together until they looked like a single line; his eyes flashed ominously beneath his heavy brows. In his anger he did, as he was privileged to do to any inferior member of his community, forgetting that Dino Vasari, with his five-and-twenty years, had passed from under his control, and was free to resent an offered indignity. But Dino had laid himself open to rebuke by adopting the tone of a penitent. Thence it came that the Prior lifted his hand and struck him, as he sometimes struck an offending novice—struck him sharply across the face. Dino turned scarlet, and then white as death; he sank a little lower, and crushed his thin fingers more closely together, but he did not speak. For a moment there was silence. The waiting monks, the passing pupils who saw the blow given and received, wondered what had been the offence of one who used to be considered the brightest ornament of the monastic school, the pride and glory of his teachers. His fault must be grave, indeed, if it could move the Prior to such wrath.

Padre Cristoforo stood with his hand lifted as if he meant to repeat the blow; then it fell slowly to his side. He gathered his loose, black robe round him, as though he would not let his skirts touch the kneeling figure before him—the scorn of his gesture was unmistakable—and hastily turned away. As he went, Dino fell on his face on the marble pavement, crushed by the silence rather than the blow. Monks and pupils, following the Prior, passed their old companion, and did not dare to speak a word of greeting.

But Dino would not move. A wave of religious fervour, of passionate yearning for the old devotional life, had come across him. He might die on the pavement of the cloister; he would not be sorry even to die and have done with the manifold perplexities of life; but he would not rise until the Prior—the only father and protector that he had ever known—bade him rise. And so he lay, while the noon-day sunlight waxed and waned, and the drowsy afternoon declined to dewy eve, and the purple twilight faded into night. If the hours seemed long or short, he could not tell. A sort of stupor came over him. He knew not what was going on around him; dimly he heard feet and voices, and the sound of bells and music, but which of the sounds came to him in dreams, and which were realities, he could not tell. It was certainly a dream that Brian and Elizabeth stood beside him hand-in-hand, and told him to take courage. That, as he knew afterwards, was quite too impossible to be true. But it was a dream that brought him peace.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BY LAND AND SEA.

At night the Prior sent for him. Dino's hearing was dulled by fatigue and fasting: he did not understand at first what was said. But, by-and-bye, he knew that he was ordered to go into the guest-room, where the Prior awaited his coming. The command gave Dino an additional pang: the guest-room was for strangers, not for one who had been as a child of the house. But he lifted himself up feebly from the cold stones, and followed the lay-brother, who had brought the message, to the appointed place.

The Prior was an austere man, but not devoid of compassion, nor even of sympathy. He received Dino with no relaxation of his rather grim features, but told him to eat and drink before speaking. "I will not talk to you fasting," he said; and Dino felt conscious of some touch of compassion in the old man's eyes as he looked at him.

Dino sat, therefore, and tried to eat and drink, but the effort was almost in vain. When he had swallowed a few mouthfuls of bread and water mixed with a little wine, which was all that he could touch, he stood up in token that he was ready for the Prior's questions; and Father Cristoforo, who had meanwhile been walking up and down the room with a restless air, at once stopped short and began to speak.

Let it be remembered that Dino felt towards this rugged-faced, stern-voiced priest as loving a son feels towards a wise father. His affections were strong; and he had few objects on which to expend them. The Prior's anger meant to him not merely the displeasure of one in authority, but the loss of a love which had shielded and enveloped him ever since he came to the monastery-school when he was ten years old. He seemed to have an absolute need of it; without it, life was impossible to go on.

Father Cristoforo was not without visitings of the same sort of feeling; but he allowed no trace of such soft-heartedness to appear as he put Dino through a searching examination concerning the way in which he had spent his time in England. Dino answered his questions fully and clearly: he had nothing that he wished to hide. Even the Prior could not accuse him of a wish to excuse himself. He told the story of his interview with Hugo, of the dinner, of Hugo's attack upon him, and of his sojourn in the hospital, where Brian had sought him out and convinced him (without knowing that he was doing so) of his innocence with respect to Hugo's plot. Then came the story of his intercourse with Brian, his discovery that Brian's happiness hinged upon his love for Elizabeth Murray, and his attempts

to unravel the very tangled skein of his friend's fortunes. Mr. Brett's opinion of the case, Brian's letter to Mrs. Luttrell, Dino's own visit to Scotland, with its varied effects, including the final destruction of the papers—all this was quietly and fully detailed, with an occasional interruption only from Padre Cristoforo in the shape of a question or a muttered comment. And when the whole story was told the Prior spoke.

Everything that Dino had done was, of course, wrong. He ought never to have seen Hugo, or dined with him: he ought to have gone to Father Connolly, the priest to whose care he had been recommended, as soon as he came out of hospital: he ought never to have interfered in Brian's love affairs, nor gone to Scotland, nor sought to impose conditions on Mrs. Luttrell, nor, in short, done any of the thousand and one things that he had done. As for the destruction of the papers, it was a point on which he (Father Cristoforo) hardly dared, he said, with a shrug of his shoulders, to touch. The base ingratitude, the unfaithfulness to the interests of the Church, the presumption, the pride, the wilfulness, manifested in that action, transcended all his powers of reprobation. The matter must be referred to a higher authority than his. And so forth. And every word he said was like a dagger planted in Dino's breast.

As for his desire to be a monk, the Prior repudiated the notion with contempt. Dino Vasari a monk, after this lapse from obedience and humility? He was not fit to do the humblest work of the lowest servant of those who lived by the altar. He had not even shown common penitence for his sin. Let him do that: let him humble himself: let him sit in dust and ashes, metaphorically speaking: and then, by-and-bye, the Church might open her arms to him, and listen to the voice of his prayer. But now — Father Cristoforo declined even to hear any formal confession: his pupil must wait and prepare himself, before he was fit for the sacrament of penance.

To Dino, this was a hard sentence. He did not know that the Prior was secretly much better satisfied with his submissive state of mind than he chose to allow, or that he had made up his mind to relax his severity on the morrow. Just for this one night the Prior had resolved to be stern and harsh. "I will make him eat dust," he said to himself, out of his real vexation and disappointment, as he looked vengefully at Dino, who was lying face downwards on the ground, weeping with all the self-abandonment of his nature. "He must never rebel again." The Prior knew that his measures were generally effectual: he meant to take strong ones now.

"There is something more in it that I can understand," he mur-

mured to himself, presently, after he had taken a few turns up and down the room. He halted beside Dino's prostrate form, and looked down upon it with a hidden gentleness shining out of his deep-set eyes. But he would not speak gently. "You have not told me all," he said. "Rise: let me see your face."

Dino struggled to his knees, and, after a moment's hesitation, dropped his hands to his sides.

"What else have you to tell me?" said the priest, fixing his eyes on the young man's face, as if he could read the secrets of his soul.

"I have told you all that I did," stammered Dino.

"But not all that you thought."

There was a short silence. Then Dino spoke again, in short-broken sentences, which at times the Prior could scarcely hear.

"Reverend Father, there is one thought, one feeling. I do not know what it is. I am haunted by a face which never leaves me. And yet I saw it twice only: once in a picture and once in life; but it comes between me and my prayers. I cannot forget her."

"Whose face was this?" asked the Prior, with the subtle change of eye and lip which showed that Dino's answer had fulfilled his expectations. "Her name?"

But the name that Dino murmured was not one that Padre Cristoforo had expected to hear from him.

"Elizabeth Murray!" he repeated. "The woman that Brian Luttrell loves—for whose sake you gave up your inheritance—that you might not turn her out. The mystery is solved. I see the motive now. You love this woman."

"And if I have loved her, if I do love her," said Dino, passionately, his whole face lighting up with impetuous feeling, and his hands trembling as they clasped each other, "it is no sin to love."

The Prior gave him a long, steady gaze. "You have sacrificed your faith to your love," he said, "and that is a sin. You have forgotten your obedience to the Church for a woman's sake—and that is a sin. Lastly, you come here professing a monk's vocation, yet acknowledging—with reluctance—that this woman's face comes between you and your prayers. I do not say that this is a sin, but I say that you had better leave us to-morrow, for you have proved yourself unfit for the life that we lead at San Stefano. Go back to Scotland and marry. Or, if you cannot do that, we will give you money, and start you in some professional career; your aims are too low, your will is too weak, for us."

Again the Prior was not quite in earnest. He wanted to try

the strength of his pupil's resolve. But when Dino said, "I will not leave you, I will tend the vines and the goats at your door, but I will never go away," the priest felt a revival of all the old tenderness which he had been used to lavish silently on the brown-eyed boy who had come to him from old Assunta.

"I will not go!" cried Dino. "I have no one in the world but you. Ah, my father, will you never forgive me?"

"It is not my forgiveness you need," said the Prior, shortly. "But come, the hour is late. We will give you shelter for the night, at least."

"Let me go to the chapel first," pleaded Dino, in a voice which had suddenly grown faint. "I dared not enter it this morning, but now let me pray there for a little while. I must ask forgiveness there."

"Pray there if you choose," said the Prior; "and pray for the penitence which you have yet to learn. When that is won, then talk of forgiveness.

He coldly withdrew the hand that Dino tried to kiss; he left the room without uttering one word of comfort or encouragement. It was good for his pupil, he thought, to be driven well-nigh to despair.

Dino, left to himself, remained for a few minutes in the posture in which the Prior had left him; then rose and made his way, slowly and feebly, to the little monastery chapel, where a solitary lamp swung before the altar, and a flood of moonlight fell through the coloured panes of the clerestory windows. Dino stood passive in that flood of moonlight, almost forgetting why he had come. His brain was dizzy, his heart was sick. His mind was distracted with the thought of a guilt which he did not feel to be his own, of sin for which his conscience did not smite him. For, with a strange commingling of clear-sightedness and submission to authority, he still believed that he had done perfectly right in giving up his claim to the Scotch estate, and yet, with all his heart, desired to feel that he had done wrong. And when the words with which Father Cristoforo had reproached him came back to his mind, his burden seemed greater than he could bear. With a moan of pain he sank down close beside the altar-steps. And there, through the midnight hours, he lay alone and wrestled with himself.

It was no use. Everything fell from him in that hour except that faith and that love which had been the controlling powers of his life. He had loved Brian as a brother; and he had done well: he had loved Elizabeth—though he had not known that the dreaming fancies which had lately centred round her deserved the name which the Prior had given to them—and he had not done ill;

and it was right that he should give to them, what might, perhaps, avail to make their lives a little happier—at any rate all that he had to give. The Prior had said that he was wrong. And would the good God, whom he had always loved and worshipped from the days of his earliest boyhood, would the good God condemn, him, too! He did not think so. He was not sorry for what he had done at all.

No, he did not repent.

But how would it fare with him next day if he told the Prior this, the inmost conviction of his heart? He would be told again that he was not fit to be a monk. And the desire to be a monk—curious as it may seem to us—had grown up with Dino as a beautiful ideal. Was he now to be thrust out into the world—the world where men stole and lied and stabbed each other in the dark, all for the sake of a few acres of land or a handful of gold pieces—and denied the hard, ascetic, yet tranquil and finely-ordered life which he had hoped to lead, when he put on his monkish robe, for the remainder of his days?

Dino was an enthusiast: he might, perhaps, have been disenchanted if he had lived as one of themselves amongst the brethren who seemed to him so enviable; but just now his whole being rose in revolt against a decision which deprived him of all that he had been taught to consider blessed.

Then a strange revulsion of feeling came. There were good men in the world, he remembered, as well as bad: there were beautiful women; there was art, and music, and much that makes life seem worth living. Why, after all, if the monks rejected him, should he not go to the world and take his pleasure there like other men? And there came a vision of Elizabeth, with her pale face turned to him in pity, and her hand beckoning him to follow her. Then, after a little interval, he came to himself, and knew that his mind had wandered; and so, in order to steady his thoughts, he began to speak aloud, and a novice, who had been sent to say a certain number of prayers at that hour in church by way of penance, started from a fitful slumber on his knees, and heard the words that Dino said. They sounded strange to the young novice: he repeated them next day with a sense that he might be uttering blasphemy, and was very much astonished when the Prior drew his hand across his eyes as if to wipe away a tear, and did not seem horrified in the very least. And this was what Dino said:—

"Wrong! Wrong! All wrong! And yet it seemed right to love God's creatures . . Perhaps I loved them too much. So I am punished. . . But, after all, He knows: He understands. If they put me out of His church, perhaps He will let me serve

Him somewhere - somehow—I don't know where: He knows. Oh, my God, if I have loved another more than Thee, forgive me . . and let me rest, . . for I am tired—tired—tired——"

The voice sank into an inarticulate murmur, in which the novice, frightened and perplexed, could not distinguish words. Then there was silence. One little sigh escaped those lips, and that was all. The novice turned and fled, terrified at those words of prayer, which seemed to him so different from any that he had ever heard—so different that they must be wrong!

At four in the morning the monks came in to chant their morning prayer. One by one they dropped into their places, scarcely noticing the prostrate figure before the altar-steps. It was usual enough for one of their number, or even a stranger staying in the monastery, to humiliate himself in that manner as a public penance. The Prior only gave a little start, as if an electric shock passed through his frame, when, on taking his seat in the choir, his eye fell upon that motionless form. But he did not leave his place until the last prayer had been said, the last psalm chanted. Then he rose and walked deliberately to the place where Dino lay, and laid his hand upon his head.

"My son!" he said, gently. There was a great fear in his face, a tremor of startled emotion in his voice. "Dino, my beloved! I pardon thee."

But Dino did not hear. His prayer had been granted him; he was at rest. God had been more merciful than man. The Prior's pardon came too late.

. . . . . .

And far away, on a southern sea, where each great wave threatened to engulf the tiny boat which seemed like a child's toy thrown upon the waters, three men were struggling for dear life—for the life that Dino Vasari had been so ready to lay down—toiling, with broken oars, and roughly-fashioned sails, and ragged streamers as signals of distress, to win their way back to solid land, and live once more with their fellows the common but precious life of common men.

They had narrowly escaped death by fire, and were fast losing hope of ultimate rescue. For five days they had been tossing on the waves of the Southern Atlantic, and they had seen as yet no sign of land; no friendly sail bearing down upon them to bring relief. Their stock of food was scanty, the water supply had now entirely failed. The tortures of a raging thirst under a sultry sky had begun: the men's lips were black and swollen, their bloodshot eyes searched the horizon in anguished, fruitless yearning. There was no cloud in all the great expanse of blue: there was nothing to be seen between sea and sky but this one

frail boat with its three occupants. Another and a larger boat had set out with them, but they had lost sight of it in the night. There had been five men in this little cockle-shell when they left the ship; but one of them had lost his senses and jumped overboard, drowning before their very eyes; and one, a mere lad, had died on the second day from injuries received on board the burning vessel. And of the three who were left, it seemed as if one, at least, would speedily succumb to the exposure and privations which they had been driven to endure.

This man lay prostrate at the bottom of the boat. He could hold out no longer. His half-closed eyes, his open mouth and swollen features showed the suffering which had brought him to this pass. Another man sat bowed together in a kind of torpor. A third, the oldest and most experienced of the party, kept his hand upon the tiller; but there was a sullen hopelessness in his air, a nerveless dejection in the pose of his limbs, which showed that he had neither strength nor inclination to fight much longer against fate.

It was at nine o'clock on the fifth day of their perilous voyage, that the steersman lifted up his eyes, and saw a faint trail of smoke on the horizon. He uttered a hoarse, inarticulate cry, and rose up, pointing with one shaking finger to the distant sign. "A steamer!" He could say nothing more, but the word was enough. It called back life even to the dull eyes of the man who had lain down to die. And he who was sitting with his head bowed wearily upon his knees, looked up with a quick, sudden flicker of hope which seemed likely enough to be extinguished as soon as it was evident.

For it was probable that the steamer would merely cross the line of vision and disappear, without approaching them near enough to be of any use. Eagerly they watched. They strained their eyes to see it: they spent their strength in rigging up a tattered garment or two to serve as a signal of distress. Then they waited through hours of sickening, terrible suspense. And the steamer loomed into sight: nearer it came and nearer. They were upon its track: surely succour was nigh at hand.

And succour came. The great vessel slackened its pace: it came to a standstill and waited, heaving to and fro upon the waters, as if it were a live thing with a beating and compassionate heart. The two men in the boat, standing up and faintly endeavouring to raise their voices, saw that a great crowd of heads was turned towards them from the sides of the vessel, that a boat was lowered and pushed off. The plashing of oars, the sound of a cheer, came to the ears of the seafarers. The old sailor muttered something that sounded like "Thank God!" and

his companion burst into tears, but the man at the bottom of the boat lay still: they had not been able to make him hear or understand. The officer in the boat from the steamer stood up as it approached, and to him the old man addressed himself as soon as he could speak.

"We're the second mate and bo'sun of the *Falcon*, sir, and one steerage passenger. Destroyed by fire five days ago; and we've been in this here cockle-shell ever since." But his voice was so husky and dry that he was almost unintelligible. "Mates, for the love of Heaven, give us summat to drink," cried the other man, as he was lifted into the boat. And in a few minutes they were speeding back to the steamer, and the sailors were trying to pour a few drops of brandy and water down the parched throat of the one man who seemed to be beyond speech and movement.

The mate was able to give a concise account of the perils of the last few days when he arrived on board the *Arizona;* but there was little to relate. The story of a fire, of a hurried escape, of the severance of the boats, and the agonies of thirst endured by the survivors had nothing in it that was particularly new. The captain dismissed the men good-humouredly to the care of cook and steward: it was only the steerage passenger who required to be put under the doctor's care. It seemed that he had been hurt by the falling of a spar, and severely scorched in trying to save a child who was in imminent danger; and, though he had at first been the most cheery and hopeful of the party, his strength had soon failed, and he had lain half or wholly unconscious for the greater part of the last two or three days.

There was one passenger on board the *Arizona* who listened to all these details with a keener interest than that shown by any other listener. He went down and talked to the men himself as soon as he had the chance and asked their names. One of the officers came with him, and paid an almost equally keen attention to the replies.

"Mine's Thomas Jackson, sir; and the bo'sun's name it is Fall—Andrew Fall. And the passenger, sir? Steerage he was: he was called Mackay."

"No, he warn't," said the boatswain, in a gruff tone. "Saving your presence, sir, his name was Smith."

"Mackay," said the mate, with equal positiveness. "And a fine fellow he was, too, and one of the best for cheering of us up with his stories and songs; and not above a bit of a prayer, too, when the worst came to the worst. I heard him myself."

"No sign of your friend here, Mr. Heron, I'm afraid," whispered the ship's officer.

"I am afraid not. Was there a passenger on board the *Falcon* called Stretton.'

"No, sir. I'm sure o' that."

"Or—Luttrell?"

Percival Heron knew well enough that no such name had been found amongst the list of passengers; but he had a vague notion that Brian might have resumed his former appellation for some reason or other after he came on board. Thomas Jackson considered the subject for a few minutes.

"I ain't rightly sure, sir. Seems to me there was a gent of that name, or something like it, on board: but if so, he was amongst those in the other boat."

"I should like to see this man Mackay—or Smith," said Percival.

The berth in which the steerage passenger lay was pointed out to him: he looked at the face upon the pillow, and shook his head. A rough, reddened, blistered face it was, with dirt grained into the pores and matting the hair and beard: not in the least like the countenance of the man whom he had come to seek.

"We may fall in with the other boat," suggested the officer.

But though the steamer went out of her course in search of it, and a careful watch was kept throughout the day and night, the other boat could not be seen.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WRECKED.

PERCIVAL cultivated acquaintance with the two sailors, and tried to obtain from them some description of the passengers on board the *Falcon*. But description was not their forte. He gained nothing but a clumsy mass of separate facts concerning passengers and crew, which assisted him little in forming an opinion as to whether Brian Luttrell had, or had not, been on board. He was inclined to think—not.

"But he seemed to have a slippery habit of turning up in odd places where you don't in the least expect to find him," soliloquised Percival over a cigar. "Why couldn't he have stayed comfortably dead in that glacier? Or why did the brain fever not carry him off? He has as many lives as a cat. He, drowned or burnt when the *Falcon* was on fire? Not a bit of it. I'll believe in Mr. Brian Luttrell's death when I have seen him screwed into his coffin, followed him to the grave, ordered a headstone, and written his epitaph. And even then, I should feel that there was no knowing whether he had not buried himself under false pretences, and was, in reality, enjoying life at the

Antipodes. I don't know anybody else who can be, 'like Cerberus, three gentlemen at once.' I shall nail him to one *alias* for the future, if I catch him. But there seems very little chance of my catching him at all. I've come on a wild-goose chase, and can't expect to succeed."

This mood of comparative depression did not last long. Percival felt certain that the other boat would be overtaken, or that Brian would be found to have sailed in another ship. He could not reconcile himself to any idea of returning to Elizabeth with his task half done.

They were nearing the Equator, and the heat of the weather was great. It was less fine, however, than was usually the case, and when Percival turned into his berth one night, he noticed that the stars were hidden, and that rain was beginning to fall. He slept lightly, and woke now and then to hear the swish of water outside, and the beat of the engines, the dragging of a rope, or the step of a sailor overhead. He was dreaming of Elizabeth, and that she was standing with him beside Brian Luttrell's grave, when suddenly he awoke with a violent start, and a sense that the world was coming to an end. In another moment he was out of his berth and on the floor. There had been a scraping sound, then a crash—and then the engines had stopped. There was a swaying sensation for a second or two, and then another bump. Percival knew instinctively what was the matter. The ship had struck.

After that moment's silence there was an outcry, a trampling of feet, a few minutes' wild confusion. The voice of the captain rose strong and clear above the hubbub as he gave his orders. Percival, already half-dressed, made his appearance on deck and soon learned what was the matter. The ship had struck twice heavily, and was now filling as rapidly as possible. The sailors were making preparations for launching the long boat. "Women and children first," said the captain, in his stentorian tones.

The noise subsided as he made his calm presence felt. The children cried, indeed, and a few of the women shrieked aloud; but the men passengers and crew alike, bestirred themselves to collect necessary articles, to reassure the timid, and to make ready the boats.

Percival was amongst the busiest and the bravest. His strength made him useful, and it was easier for him to use it in practical work than to stand and watch the proceedings, or even to console women and children. For one moment he had a deep and bitter sense of anger against the ordering of his fate. Was he to go down into the deep waters in the heyday of his youth and strength, before he had done his work or tasted the reward

of work well done? Had Brian Luttrell experienced a like fate? And what would become of Elizabeth, sitting lonely in the midst of splendours which she had felt were not justly hers, waiting for weeks and months and years, perhaps, for the lovers who would never come back until the sea gave up its dead?

Percival crushed back the thought. There was no time for anything but action. And his senses seemed gifted with preternatural acuteness. He saw a child near him put her little hand into that of a soldierly-looking man, and heard her whisper —"You won't leave me, papa?" And the answer—"Never, my darling. Don't fear." Just behind him a man whispered in a woman's ear—"Forgive me, Mary." Percival wondered vaguely what that woman had to forgive. He never saw any of the speakers again.

For a strange thing happened. Strange, at least, it seemed to him; but he understood it afterwards. The ship was really resting upon a ledge of the rock on which she had struck: there was little to be seen in the darkness except a white line of breakers and a mass of something beyond—was it land? The ship gave a sudden outward lurch. There went up a cry to Heaven—a last cry from most of the souls on board the ill-fated *Arizona*—and then came the end. The vessel fell over the edge of the rocky shelf into deep water and went down like a stone.

Percival was a good swimmer, and struck out vigorously, without any expectation, however, of being able to maintain himself in the water for more than a very short time. Escape from the tangled rigging and floating pieces of the wreck was a difficult matter; but the water was very calm inside the reef, and not at all cold. He tried to save a woman as she was swept past him: for a time he supported a child, but the effort to save it was useless. The little creature's head struck against some portion of the wreck and it was killed on the spot. Percival let the little dead face sink away from him into the water and swam further from the point where it went down.

"There must be others saved as well as myself," he thought, when he was able to think at all coherently. "At least, let me keep myself up till daylight. One may see some way of escape then." It had been three o'clock when the ship struck. He had remembered to look at his watch when he was first aroused. Would his strength last out till morning?

If his safety had depended entirely on his swimming powers he would have been, indeed, in evil case. But long before the first faint streak of dawn appeared, it seemed to him that he was coming in contact with something solid—that there was something hard and firm beneath him which he could touch from time

to time. The truth came to him at last. The tide was going down; and as it went down, it would leave a portion of the reef within his reach. There might be some unwashed point to which he could climb as soon as daylight came. At any rate, as the waters ebbed, he found that he could cling to the rock, and then that he could even stand upon it, although the waves broke over him at every moment, and sometimes nearly washed him from his hold.

Never was daylight more anxiously awaited. It came at last; a faint, grey light in the east, a climbing flush of rose-colour, a host of crimson wavelets on a golden sea. And, as soon as the darkness disappeared, Percival found that his conjecture was a correct one. He was not alone. There were others beside himself who had won their way to even safer positions than his own. Portions of the reef on which the ship had struck were now to be plainly seen above the sea-level; it was plain that they were rarely touched by the salt water, for there was an attempt at vegetation in one or two places. And beyond the reef Percival saw land, and land that it would be easy enough to reach.

He turned to look for the remains of the *Arizona*, but there was little to be seen. The tops of her masts were visible only in the deep water near the reef. Spars, barrels, articles of furniture, could here and there be distinguished; nothing of value nor of interest. Percival determined to try for the shore. But first he would see whether he could help the other men whom he had discerned at a little distance from him on a higher portion of the reef.

He crept out to them, feeling his way cautiously, and not sure whether he might not be swept off his feet by the force of the waves. To his surprise, when he reached the two men, he found that they were two of the survivors from the wreck of the *Falcon*. One of them was Thomas Jackson, and the other was Mackay, the steerage passenger.

"It's plain you weren't born to be drowned," said Percival, addressing Jackson, familiarly.

"No, sir, it don't seem like it," returned the man. "There's one or two more that have saved themselves by swimming, too, I fancy. We'd better make land while we can, sir."

"Your friend's not able to help himself much, is he?" said Percival, with a sharp glance at the bearded face of the steerage passenger.

"Swims like a duck when he's all right, sir; but at present he's got a broken leg. Fainted just now; he'll be better presently. I wouldn't have liked to leave him behind."

"We'll haul him ashore between us," said Percival.

It was more easily said than done; but the task was accomplished at last. Thomas Jackson was of a wiry frame: Percival's trained muscles (he had been in the boats at Oxford) stood him in good stead. They reached the mainland, carrying the steerage passenger with them; for the poor man, not yet half-recovered from the effects of exposure and privation, and now suffering from a fracture of the bone just above the ankle, was certainly not in a fit state to help himself. On the island they found a few cocoa-nut trees: under one of these they laid their burden, and then returned to the shore to see whether there was any other castaway whom they could assist.

In this search they were successful. One man had already followed their example and swam ashore, but he was so much exhausted that they felt bound to help him to the friendly shade of the cocoa-nut trees, where the steerage passenger, now conscious of his position, and as deadly white with the pain of his broken bone as the discolouration of his scorched face permitted him to be, moved aside a little in order to make room for him. There was another man on the reef; but he had been crushed between the upper and lower topsails, and it was almost impossible to get him to shore. Percival and Jackson made the effort, but a great wave swept the man into a cavern of the reef to which he was clinging before they could come to his assistance, and he was not seen again. With a lad of sixteen and another sailor they were more fortunate. So that when at last they met under the tree to compare notes and count their numbers, they found that the party consisted of six persons: Heron, Thomas Jackson, and his pet, the steerage passenger; George Pollard, the steward; Fenwick, the sailor; and Jim Barry, the cabin boy. They stared at each other in rather helpless silence for about a minute, and then Heron burst into a strange laugh.

"Well, I've heard of a desert island all my life," he said, "but I never was on one before."

"I was," said Fenwick, slowly, "and I didn't expect to get landed upon another. But, Lord! if once you go to sea, there's no telling."

"You must feel thankful that you're landed at all," remarked Percival. "You might have been food for the fishes by this time."

"I'd most as soon," said Fenwick, in a stolid tone, which had a depressing effect on the spirits of some of the party. The lad Barry began to whimper a little, and Pollard looked very downcast.

"Cheer up, lads," said Percival, quickly. It was wonderful to see how naturally he fell into a position of command amongst

them. "That isn't the way to get home again. Never fear but a ship will pass the island and pick us up. We can't be far out of the ordinary course of the steamers. We shall be here a day or two only, or a week, perhaps. What do you say, Jackson?"

Jackson drew the back of his hand across his mouth, and seemed to meditate a reply; but while he considered the matter, the steerage passenger spoke for the first time.

"Mr. Heron is right," he said, causing Percival a moment's surprise at the fact of his name being so accurately known by a man to whom he had never spoken either on board the *Arizona* or since they landed. "We all ought to feel thankful to Almighty God for bringing us safe to land, instead of grumbling that the island has no inhabitants. We have had a wonderful escape."

"And so say I, sir," said Jackson, touching an imaginary cap with his forefinger, while Barry and Fenwick both looked a little ashamed of themselves, and Pollard mechanically followed the example set by the sailor. "Them as grumbles had better keep out of my sight unless they want to be kicked."

"You're fine fellows, both of you," cried Percival, heartily. And then he shook hands with Jackson, and would have followed suit with the steerage passenger, had not Mackay drawn back his hand.

"I'm not in condition for shaking hands with anybody," he said, with a smile; and Percival remembered his burns and was content.

"I know this place," said Jackson, looking round him presently. "It's a dangerous reef, and there's been a many accidents near it. Ships give it a wide berth, as a general rule." The men's faces drooped when they heard this sentence. "The *Duncan Dunbar* was wrecked here on theway to Auckland. The *Mercurius*, coming back from Sydney by way of 'Frisco, she was wrecked, too—in '70. It's the Rocas Reef, mates, which you may have heard of or you may not; and, as near as I remember, its about three degrees south of the Line: longitude thirty-three twenty, west."

"I remember now," said Percival, eagerly. His work as a journalist helped him to remember the event to which Jackson alluded. "The men of the *Mercurius* found some iron tanks filled with water, left by the *Duncan Dunbar* people. We might go and see if they are still here. But first we must attend to this man's leg."

"It is not very bad," said Mackay.

"It's tremendously swollen, at any rate. Are you good at this sort of work, Jackson? I can't say I am."

"I know something about it," said Jackson. "Let's have a look, mate."

He knelt down and felt the swollen limb, putting its owner to considerable pain, as Percival judged from the way in which he set his teeth during the operation. Jackson had, however, a tolerable knowledge of a rough sort of surgery, and managed to set the bone and bind up the swollen limb in a manner that showed skill and tenderness as well as knowledge. And then Percival proposed that they should try to find some food, and make the tour of the island before the day grew hotter. The leadership of the party had been tacitly accorded to him from the first; and, after a consultation with the others, Jackson stepped forward to say that they all wished to consider themselves under Mr. Heron's orders, "he having more head than the rest of them, and being a gentleman born, no doubt." At which Heron laughed good-humouredly and accepted the position. "And none of us grudge you being the head," said Jackson, sagely, "except, maybe, one, and he don't count." Heron made no response; but he wondered for a moment whether the one who grudged him his leadership could possibly be Mackay, whose eyes had a quiet attentiveness to all his doings, which looked almost like criticism. But there was no other fault to be found with Mackay's manner, while against Fenwick's dogged air Percival felt some irritation.

The want of food was decidedly the first difficulty. Sea-birds' eggs and young birds, shell-fish and turtle, were all easily to be obtained; but how were they to be cooked? Percival was not without hopes that some tinned provisions might be cast ashore from the wreck; but at present there was nothing of the kind to be seen. A few cocoa-nuts were procurable: and these provided them with meat and drink for the time being. Then came the question of fire. The only possible method of obtaining it was the Indian one of rubbing two sticks diligently together for the space of some two hours; and Thomas Jackson sat down with stoical patience worthy of an Indian himself to fulfil this operation.

Percival, who felt that he could not bear to be doing nothing, started off for a walk round the island, and the rest of the party dozed in the shade until the return of their leader.

When Heron came back he made his report as cheerful as he could, but he could not make it a particularly brilliant one, although he did his best. He was one of those men who grumble at trifles, but are unusually bright and cheerful in the presence of a great emergency. The sneer had left his face, the cynical accent had disappeared from his voice; he employed all his social gifts, which were naturally great, for the entertainment of his comrades. As they ate boiled eggs and fried fish and other morsels which

seemed especially dainty when cooked over the fire that Jackson's patient industry had lighted at last, the spirits of the whole party seemed to rise; and Percival's determination to look upon the bright side of things, produced a most enlivening effect. Some of them remembered afterwards, with a sort of puzzled wonder, that they had more than once laughed heartily during their first meal upon the Rocas Reef.

Yet none of them were insensible to the danger through which they had passed, nor the terrible position in which they stood. Uppermost in the minds of each, although none of them liked to put it into words, was the question—How long shall we stay here? Is it likely that any ship will observe our signal of distress and come to our aid? They looked each other furtively in the eyes, and read no comfort in each other's face.

They had landed upon one of two islands, about fifteen acres each in size, which were separated at high water, but communicated with each other when the tide had ebbed. Both islands lay low, and had patches of white sand in the centre; but there was very little vegetation. Even grass seemed as if it would not grow; and the cocoa-nut trees were few and far between.

The signs of previous wrecks struck the men's hearts with a chill. There was a log hut, to which Mackay was moved when evening came on; there were the iron tanks of which Percival had made mention, filled with rain-water; there were some rotten boards, and a small hammer and a broken knife; but there was no fresh-water spring, and there were no provision chests, such as Heron had vainly hoped to find.

The setting up of a distress-signal on the highest point of the island was the next matter to be attended to; and for this purpose nothing could be found more suitable than a very large yellow silk-handkerchief which Percival had found in his pocket. It did not make a very large flag, although it was enormous as a handkerchief; but no other article of clothing could well be spared. Indeed, the spareness of their coverings was a matter of some regret and anxiety on Percival's part. He could not conceive what they were to do if they were on the island for more than a few days; the rough work which would be probably necessary being somewhat destructive of woollen and linen garments. Jackson, with whom he ventured a joke on the subject, did not receive it in very good part. "You needn't talk as if we was to stay here for ever, Mr. Heron, sir," he murmured. "But there's always cocoa-nut fibre, if the worst comes to the worst."

"Ah, yes, cocoa-nut fibre," said Percival, turning his eyes to one of the slim, straight stems of the palm trees. "I forgot that.

I seem to have walked straight into one of Jules Verne's books. Gad! I wish I could walk out of it again. What a thrilling narrative I'll make of this for the *Mail* when I get home. If ever I do get home. Bah, it's no use to talk of that."

These reflections were made under his breath, while Jackson walked on to examine a nest of sea-birds' eggs; for Percival was wisely resolved against showing a single sign of undue anxiety or depression of spirits, lest it should re-act on the minds of those who had declared themselves his followers. For the rest of the day the party worked hard at various contrivances for their own welfare and comfort.

Firewood was collected: birds and fish caught for the evening meal. To each member of the party a task was assigned: even Mackay could make himself useful by watching the precious flame which must never be suffered to go out. And thus the day wore on, and night came with its purple stillness and its tropical wealth of stars.

The men sought shelter in the hut: Percival only, by his own choice, remained outside until he thought that they were sleeping. He wanted to be alone. He had banished reflection pretty successfully during the day; but at night he knew that it would get the better of him. And he felt that he must meet and master the thronging doubts and fears and regrets that assailed him. Whatever happened he would not be sorry that he had come. If he never saw Elizabeth's face again, he was sure that her memories of him would be full of tenderness. What more did he want? And yet he wanted more.

He found out what his heart desired before he laid himself down to sleep amongst the men. He would have given a year of his life to know whether Brian Luttrell was alive or dead. And he could not honestly say that he wished Brian Luttrell to be alive.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ON THE ROCAS REEF.

THE morning light showed several articles on the shore which had been washed up from the wreck. Some tins of biscuits were likely to be very useful, and a box of carpenter's tools, most of them sadly rusted, was welcomed eagerly; but nothing else was found, and the day might have begun with murmurs of discontent but for a discovery made by Mackay, which restored satisfaction to the men's faces.

Close by his head in the log hut where he had spent the night, he found a sort of cupboard—something like a rabbit-hutch. And

this cupboard contained—oh, joyful discovery!—not gold or gems, nor any such useless glittering lumber, but something far more precious to these weary mariners—two bottles of brandy and a chest of tea. Perhaps a former sojourner on the island had placed them in that hiding-place, thinking compassionately of the voyagers who might in some future day find themselves in bitter need upon the Rocas Reef. "Whoever it was as left 'em here," said Pollard, "got off safe again, you may depend on it; and so shall we." Percival said nothing: he had been thinking that perhaps the former owner of this buried treasure had died upon the island. He hoped that they would not find his grave.

He measured out some tea for the morning's meal, but decided that neither tea nor spirits should be used, except on special occasions or in cases of illness. The men accepted his decision as a reasonable one; they were all well-disposed and tractable on the whole. Percival was amazed to find them so easy to manage. But they were more depressed that morning at the thought of their lost comrades, their wrecked ship, and the prospect of passing an indefinite time upon the coral-reef, than they had been on the previous day. It was a relief when they were busy at their respective tasks; and Percival found an odd kind of pleasure in all sorts of hard and unusual work; in breaking up rotten planks, for instance; in extracting old nails painfully and laboriously from them for future use; and in tramping to and fro between the sea-shore and the log hut, carrying the drift-wood deposited on the sand to a more convenient resting-place. They had planned to build another hut, as the existing structure was both small and frail; and Percival laboured at his work like a giant. In the hot time of the day, however, he was glad to do as the others did; to throw down his tools, such as they were, and creep into the shadow of the log hut. The heat was very great; and the men were beginning to suffer from the bites of venomous ants which infested the island. In short, as Percival said to himself, the Rocas Reef was about as little like Robinson Crusoe's island as it could possibly be. Life would be greatly ameliorated if goats and parrots could be found amongst the rocks; shell-fish and sea-fowl were a poor exchange for them; and an island that was "desert" in reality as well as in name, was a decidedly prosaic place on which to spend a few days, or weeks, or months. Of course he made none of these remarks in public; he contented himself with humming in an undertone the words of Alexander Selkirk, as interpreted by Cowper:—

"I am monarch of all I survey,
My right there is none to dispute—"

a quotation which brought a meaning smile to Mackay's face, whereupon Percival laughed and checked himself.

"How are you to-day?" he said, addressing the steerage passenger with some show of good-humoured interest. Mackay was lying on the sand, propped up against the wall of the hut, and Percival was breaking his nails over an obstinate screw which was deeply embedded in a thick piece of wood.

"Better, thanks." The voice was curiously hoarse and gruff.

"Jackson isn't a bad surgeon, I fancy."

"Not at all."

"Lucky for you that he was saved."

"I owe my life twice to him and once to you."

"I hope you think it's something to be grateful for," said Percival, carelessly. "You've had some escapes to tell your friends about when you get home."

Mackay turned aside his head. "I have no friends to tell," he said, shortly.

"Ah! more's the pity. Well, no doubt you will make some in Pernambuco—when you get there."

"Do you think we ever shall get there?"

Percival shot a rather displeased glance at him. "Don't go talking like that before the men," he said.

"I am not talking before the men," rejoined the steerage passenger, with a smile: "I am talking to you, Mr. Heron. And I repeat my question—Do you think we shall ever get to Pernambuco?"

"Yes," said Percival, stoutly. "A ship will see our signal and call for us."

"It's a very small flag," said Mackay, in a significant tone.

"Good Heavens!" burst out Percival, with the first departure from his good-humoured tone that Mackay had heard from him; "why do you take the trouble to put that side of the question to me? Don't you think I see it for myself? There is a chance, if it is only a small one; and I'm not going to give up hope—yet."

Then he walked away, as if he refused to discuss the subject any longer. Mackay looked at the sea and sighed; he was sorry that he had provoked Mr. Heron's wrath by his question. But he found afterwards that it contributed to form a kind of silent understanding between him and Percival. It was a sort of relief to both of them occasionally to exchange short, sharp sentences of doubt or discouragement, which neither of them breathed in the ear of the others. Percival divined quickly enough that the steerage passenger was not a man of Thomas Jackson's class. As the hoarseness left his voice, and the disfiguring redness disappeared from his face, Percival distinguished signs of refine-

ment and culture which he wondered at himself for not perceiving earlier. But there was nothing remarkable in his having made a mistake about Mackay's station in life. The man had come on board the *Arizona* in a state of wretched suffering: his face had been scorched, his hair and beard singed, his clothes, as well as his person, blackened by dust and smoke. Then his clothes were those of a working-man, and his speech had been rendered harsh to the ear from the hoarseness of his voice. But he gradually regained his strength as he lay in the fresh air and the sunshine, and returning health gave back to him the quiet energy and cheerfulness to which Jackson had borne testimony. He was a great favourite with the men, who, in their rough way, made a sort of pet of him, and brought him offerings of the dantiest food that they could find. And his hands were not idle. He wove baskets and plaited hats of cocoa-nut fibre with his long white fingers, which were very unlike those of the working-man that he professed to be. Percival Heron was often struck by the appearance of that hand. It was one of unusual beauty—the sort of hand that Titian or Vandyke loved to draw: long, finely-shaped, full of quiet power, and fuller, perhaps, of a subtle sort of refinement, which seems to express itself in the form of tapering fingers with filbert nails and a well-turned wrist. It was not the hand of a working-man, not even of a skilled artizan, whose hand is often delicately sensitive: it was a gentleman's hand, and as such it piqued Percival's curiosity. But Mackay was of a reserved disposition, and did not offer any information about himself.

One day when rain was falling in sheets and torrents, as it did sometimes upon the Rocas Reef, Percival turned into the log hut for shelter. Mackay was there, too; his leg had been so painful that he had not left the rude bed, which his comrades had made for him, even to be carried out into the fresh air and sunshine, for two or three days. Percival noticed the look of pain in the languid eyes, and had, for a moment, a fancy that he had seen this man before. But the burns on his face, the handkerchief tied round his head to conceal a wound on the temple, and the tangled brown beard and moustache, made it difficult to seize hold of a possible likeness.

Percival threw himself on the ground with a half-sigh, and crossed his arms behind his head.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Mackay.

Percival noticed that he never addressed him as "Sir" or "Mr. Heron," unless the other men were present.

"Jackson's ill," said Percival, curtly.

Mackay started and turned on his elbow,

"Ill?"

"Fever, I'm afraid. Not bad; just a touch of it. He's in the other hut."

"I'm sorry for that," said Mackay, lying down again.

"So am I. He is the steadiest man among them. How the rain pours! Pollard is sitting with him."

There was a little silence, after which Percival spoke again.

"Are you keeping count of the days? How long is it since we landed?"

"Sixteen days."

"Is that all? I thought it had been longer."

"You were anxious to get to your journey's end, I suppose," said the steerage passenger, after a little hesitation.

"Aren't we all anxious? Do we want to stay here for ever?" And then there was another pause, which ended by Percival's saying, in a tone of subdued irritation: "There are few of our party that have the same reasons that I have for wishing myself on the way back to England."

"You are not going to stay in South America, then?"

"Not I. There is someone I want to find; that's all."

"A man?"

"Yes, a man. I thought that he had sailed in the *Falcon*; but I suppose I was mistaken."

"And if you don't find him?"

"I must hunt the world over until I do. I won't go back to England without him, if he's alive."

"Friend or enemy?" said Mackay, fixing his eyes on Percival's face with a look of interest. At any other time Percival might have resented the question: here, in the log hut, with a tempest roaring and the rain streaming outside, and the great stormy sea as a barrier between the dwellers on the island and the rest of the civilised world, such questions and answers seemed natural enough.

"Enemy," said Percival, sharply. It was evident that some hidden sense of wrong had sprung suddenly to the light, and perhaps amazed him by its strength, for he began immediately to explain away his answer. "Hum! not that exactly. But not a friend."

"And you want to do him an injury!" said Mackay, with grave consideration.

"No, I don't," said Percival, angrily, as if replying to a suggestion that had been made a thousand times before, and flinging out his arm with a reckless, agitated gesture. "I want to do him a service—confound him!"

There was a silence. Percival lay with his out-stretched hand

clenched and his eyes fixed gloomily on the opposite wall: Mackay turned away his head. Presently, however, he spoke in a low but distinct tone.

"What is the service you propose doing me, Mr. Heron?"

"Doing you? Good Heavens! You! What do you mean?"

"I suppose that my face is a good deal disfigured at present," said the steerage passenger, passing his hand lightly over his thick, brown beard; "but when it is better, you will probably recognise me easily enough. But, perhaps, I am mistaken. I thought for a moment that you were in search of a man called Stretton, who was formerly a tutor to your step-brothers."

Percival was standing erect by this time in the middle of the floor. His hands were thrust into his pockets: his deep chest heaved: the bronzed pallor of his face had turned to a dusky red. He did not answer the words spoken to him; but after a few seconds of silence, in which the eyes of the two men met and told each other a good deal, he strode to the doorway, pushed aside the plank which served for a door, and went out into the storm. He did not feel the rain beating upon his head: he did not hear the thunder, nor see the forked lightning that played without intermission in the darkened sky; he was conscious only of the intolerable fact that he was shut up in a narrow corner of the earth, in daily, almost hourly, companionship with the one man for whom he felt something not unlike fierce hatred. And in spite of his resolution to act generously for Elizabeth's sake, the hatred flamed up again when he found himself so suddenly thrust, as it were, into Brian Luttrell's presence.

When he had walked for some time and got thoroughly wet through, it occurred to him that he was acting more like a child than a grown man; and he turned his face as impetuously towards the huts as he had lately turned his back upon them. He found plenty to do when the rain ceased. The fire had for the first time gone out, and the patience of Jackson could not now be taxed, because he was lying on his back in the stupor of fever. Percival set one of the men to work with two sticks; but the wood was nearly all damp, and it was a weary business, even when two dry morsels were found, to get them to light. However, it was better than having nothing to do. Want of employment was one of their chief trials. The men could not always be catching fish and snaring birds. They were thinking of building a small boat; but Jackson's illness deprived them of the help of one who had more practical knowledge of such matters than any of the others, and threw a damp over their spirits as well.

Jackson's illness seemed to give Percival a pretext for absenting himself from the hut in which the so-called Mackay lay. He had,

just at first, an invincible repugnance to meeting him again; he could not make up his mind how Brian Luttrell would expect to be treated, and he was almost morbidly sensitive about the mistake that he had made respecting "the steerage passenger." At night he stayed with Jackson, and sent the other men to sleep in Mackay's hut. But in the morning an absolute necessity arose for him to speak to his enemy.

Jackson was sensible, though extremely weak, when the daylight came: and his first remark was an anxious one concerning the state of his comrade's broken leg. "Will you look after it a bit, sir?" he said, wistfully, to Heron.

"I'll do my best. Don't bother yourself," said Percival, cheerfully. And accordingly he presented himself at an early hour in the other sleeping-place, and addressed Brian in a very matter of fact tone.

"Your leg must be seen to this morning. I shall make a poor substitute for Jackson, I'm afraid; but I think I shall do it better than Pollard or Fenwick."

"I've no doubt of that," said the man with the brown beard and bright, quick eyes. "Thank you."

And that was all passed that between them.

It was wonderful to see the determined, unsparing way in which Percival worked that day. His energy never flagged. He was a little less good-tempered than usual; the upright black line in his forehead was very marked, and his utterances were not always amiable. But he succeeded in his object; he made himself so thoroughly tired that he slept as soon as his head touched his hard pillow, and did not wake until the sun was high in the heavens. The men showed a good deal of consideration for him. Fenwick watched by the sick man, and Pollard and Barry bestirred themselves to get ready the morning meal, and to attend to the wants of their two helpless companions.

It was not until evening that Brian found an opportunity to say to Percival:—

"What did you want to find me for?"

"Can't you let the matter rest until we are off this——island?" said Percival, losing control of that hidden fierceness for a moment.

And Brian answered rather coldly:—"As you please."

Percival waited awhile, and then said, more deliberately:—

"I'll tell you before long. There is no hurry, you see"—with a sort of grim humour—"there is no post to catch, no homeward-bound mail steamer in the harbour. We cannot give each other the slip now."

"Do you mean that I gave you the slip?" said Brian, to whom Percival's tone was charged with offence.

"I mean that Brian Luttrell would not have been allowed to leave England quite so easily as Mr. Stretton was. But I won't discuss it just now. You'll excuse my observing that I think I would drop the 'Mackay' if I were you. It will hurt nobody here if you are called Luttrell; and—I hate disguises."

"The name Luttrell is as much a disguise as any other," said Brian, shortly. "But you may use it if you choose."

He was hardly prepared, however, for the round eyes with which the lad Barry regarded him when he next entered the log hut, nor for the awkward way in which he gave a bashful smile and pulled the front lock of his hair when Brian spoke to him.

"What are you doing that for?" he said, quickly.

"Well, sir, it's Mr. Heron's orders," said Barry.

"What orders?"

"That we're to remember you're a gentleman, sir. Gone steerage in a bit of a freak; but now you've told him you'd prefer to be called by your proper name. Mr. Luttrell, that is."

"I'm no more a gentleman than you are," said Brian, abruptly. "Call me Mackay at once as you used to do."

Barry shook his head with a knowing look. "Daren't sir. Mr. Heron is a gentleman that will have his own way. And he said you had a big estate in Scotland, sir; and lots of money."

"What other tales did he tell you?" said Brian, throwing back his head restlessly.

"Well, I don't know, sir. Only he told us that we'd better nurse you up as well as we could before we left the island, and that there was one at home as would give money to see you alive and well. A lady, I think he meant."

"What insane folly!" muttered Brian to himself. "Look here, Barry," he added aloud, "Mr. Heron was making jokes at your expense and mine. He meant nothing of the kind; I haven't a penny in the world, and I'm on the way to the Brazils to earn my living as a working-man. Now do you understand?"

Barry retired, silenced but unconvinced. And the next time that Brian saw Percival alone, he said to him drily:—

"I would rather make my own romances about my future life, if it's all the same to you."

"Eh? What? What do you mean?"

"Don't tell these poor fellows that I have property in Scotland, please. It is not the case."

"Oh, that's what you're making a fuss about. But I can't help it," said Percival, shrugging his shoulders. "If you are Brian Luttrell, as Vasari swears you are—swearing it to his own

detriment, too, which inclines me to believe that it is true—the Strathleckie estate is yours."

"You can't prove that I am Brian Luttrell."

"But I might prove—when we get back to Scotland—that you bore the name of Brian Luttrell for three or four-and-twenty years of your life.

"I am not going back to Scotland," said the young man, looking steadily and attentively at Percival's troubled countenance.

"Yes, you are. I promised that you should come back, and you must not make me break my word."

"Whom did you promise?"

"I promised Elizabeth."

And then the two men felt that the conversation had better cease. Percival walked rapidly away, while Brian, who could not walk anywhere, lay flat on his back and listened, with dreamy eyes, to the long monotonous rise and fall of the waves upon the shore.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

"POLLARD'S down with this fever," was the announcement which Percival made to Brian a few days later.

"Badly?"

"A smart touch. And Jackson doesn't mend as he ought to do. I can't understand why either of them should have it at all. The island may be barren, but it ought to be healthy."

"I wish I could do anything beside lying here like a log."

"Well, you can't," said Percival, by no means unkindly. "I never heard that it was any good to stand on a broken leg. I'll manage."

Such interchange of semi-confidential sentences was now rare between them. Percival was, for the most part, very silent when circumstances threw him into personal contact with Brian; and there was something repellant about this silence—something which prevented Brian from trying to break it. Brian was feeling bitterly that he had done Percival some wrong: he knew that he might justly be blamed for returning to Scotland after his supposed death. He need not have practised any deception at all, but, having practised it, he ought to have maintained it. He had no right to let the estates pass to Elizabeth unless he meant her to keep them. Such, he imagined, might well be Percival's attitude of mind towards him.

And then there was the question of his love for Elizabeth, of

which both Elizabeth herself and Dino Vasari had made Heron aware. But in this there was nothing to be ashamed of. When he fell in love with Elizabeth, he thought her comparatively poor and friendless, and he did not know of her engagement to Percival. He never whispered to himself that he had won her heart: that fact, which Elizabeth fancied that she had made shamefully manifest, had not been grasped by Brian's consciousness at all. He would have thought himself a coxcomb to imagine that she cared for him more than as a friend. If he had ever dreamt of such a thing, he assured himself that he had made a foolish mistake.

He thought that he understood what Percival wanted to say to him. Of course, since Dino had disclosed the truth, Elizabeth Murray desired to give up the property, and her lover had volunteered to come in search of the missing man. It was a generous act, and one that Brian thoroughly admired: it was worthy, he thought, of Elizabeth's lover. For he knew that he had always been especially obnoxious to Percival Heron in his capacity as tutor; and now, if he were to assume the character of a claimant to Elizabeth's estates, he would certainly not find the road to Percival's liking. For his own part, Brian respected and liked Percival Heron much more than he had found it possible to do during those flying visits to Italy, when he had systematically made himself disagreeable to the unknown Mr. Stretton. He admired the way in which Percival assumed the leadership of the party, and bore the burden of all their difficulties on his own broad shoulders: he admired his cheerfulness and untiring energy. He was sure that if Heron could succeed in carrying him off to England, and forcing him to make Elizabeth a poor woman instead of a rich one, he would be only too pleased to do so. But this was a thing which Brian did not mean to allow.

Jackson's illness was a protracted one, and left him in a weak state, from which he had not recovered when Pollard died. Then the boy Barry fell ill—out of sheer fright, Percival declared; but his attack was a very slight one, prolonged from want of energy rather than real indisposition. Heron was the only nurse, for Fenwick's strength had to be utilised in procuring food for the party; and, as he was often up all night and busy all day long, it was no surprise to Brian when at last he staggered, rather than walked into the hut, and threw himself down on the ground, declaring himself so tired that he could not keep awake. And he had scarcely said the words when slumber overpowered him.

Brian, who was beginning to move about a very little, crawled

to the door and managed to attract Fenwick's attention. The man—a rough, black-bearded sailor—came up to him with a less surly look than usual.

"How's Barry?" said Brian.

"Better. He's all right. They've both got round the corner now, though I think the master thought yesterday that Barry would follow Pollard. It was faint-heartedness as killed Pollard, and it's faint-heartedness that'll kill Barry, if he don't look out."

"See here," said Brian, indicating the sleeper with his finger. "You don't think Mr. Heron has got the fever, do you?"

Fenwick took a step forward and looked stolidly at Percival's face, which was very pale.

"Not he. Dead-beat, sir; that's all. He's done his work like a man, and earned a sleep. He'll be right when he wakes."

Armed with this assurance, Brian resumed his occupation of weaving cocoa-nut fibre; but he grew uneasy, when, at the end of a couple of hours, Percival's face began to flush and his limbs to toss restlessly upon the ground. He muttered incoherent words from time to time, and at last awoke and asked for water. Brian's walking was a matter of difficulty; he took some minutes in crossing the room to bring a cocoa-nut, which had been made into a cup, to Percival's side; and by the time he had done it, Heron was wide awake.

"What on earth are you doing, bringing me water in this way? You ought to be lying down, and I ought to go to Barry. If I were not so sleepy!"

"Go to sleep," said Brian. "Barry's all right. I asked Fenwick just now."

"I suppose I've gone and caught it," said Percival, in a decidedly annoyed tone of voice. "A nice state of things if I were to be laid up! I won't be laid up either. It's to a great extent a matter of will; look at Barry—and Pollard." His voice sank a little at the latter name.

"You're only tired: you will be all right presently."

"You don't think I'm going to have the fever, then?"

"No," said Brian, wondering a little at his anxiety.

There was a long pause; then Heron spoke again.

"Luttrell." It was the first time that he had addressed Brian by his name. "If I have the fever and go off my head as the others have all done, will you remember—it's just a fancy of mine—that I—I don't exactly want you to hear what I say! Leave me in this hut, or move me into the other one, will you?"

"I'll do as you wish," said Brian, seriously, "but I needn't tell you that I should attach no importance to what you said,

And I should be pleased to do anything that I was able to do for you, if you were ill."

"Well," said Percival, "I may not be ill after all. But I thought I would mention it. And, Luttrell, supposing I were to follow Pollard's example——"

"What is the good of talking in that way when you are not even ill?"

"Never mind that. If you get off this island and I don't, I want you to promise me to go and see Elizabeth." Then, as Brian hesitated, "You must go. You must see her and talk to her; do you hear? Good Heavens! How can you hesitate? Do you mean to let her think for ever that I have betrayed her trust?"

Decidedly the fever was already working in his veins. The flushed face, the unnaturally brilliant eyes, the excitement of his manner, all testified to its presence. Brian felt compelled to answer quietly,

"I promise."

"All right," said Percival, lying down again and closing his eyes. "And now you can tell Fenwick that he's got another patient. It's the fever; I know the signs."

And he was right. But the fever took a different course with him from that which it had taken with the others: he was never delirious at all, but lay in a death-like stupor from which it seemed that he might not awake. Once—some days after the beginning of his illness—he came to himself for a few minutes with unexpected suddeness. It was midnight, and there was no light in the hut beyond that which came from the brilliant radiance of the moon as it shone in at the open door. Percival opened his eyes and made a sound, to which Brian answered immediately by giving him something to drink.

"You've broken your promise," said Percival, in a whisper, keeping his eyes fixed suspiciously on Brian's face.

"No. You have never been delirious, so I never needed to leave you."

"A quibble," murmured Heron, with the faintest possible smile. "However—I'm not sorry to have you here. You'll stay now, even if I talk nonsense?"

"Of course I will." Brian was glad of the request.

In another moment the patient had relapsed into insensibility; but, curiously enough, after this conversation, Percival's mind began to wander, and he "talked nonsense" as persistently as the others had done. Brian could not see why he had at first told him to keep away. He was quite prepared for some revelation of strong feeling against himself, but none ever came.

Elizabeth's name occurred very frequently; but for the most part, it was connected with reminiscences of the past of which Brian knew nothing. Early meetings, walks about London, boy and girl quarrels were talked of, but about recent events he was silent.

Brian wondered whether he himself and Fenwick would also succumb to the malarious influences of the place; but these two escaped. Fenwick was never ill; and Brian grew stronger every day. When Percival opened his eyes once more upon him, after three weeks of illness, he said, abruptly:—

"Ah, if you had looked like that when you came on board the *Arizona*, I should never have been deceived."

Brian smiled, and made no answer. Percival watched him hobbling about the room for some minutes, and then said:—

"How long have we been on the island?"

"Forty-seven days."

"And not a sail in sight the whole time?"

"Two, but they did not come near enough to see our signals—or passed them by."

"My God!" said Percival, faintly. "Will it never end?" And then he turned away his face.

After a little silence he asked, uneasily:—

"Did I say much when I was ill?"

"Nothing of any consequence."

"But about you," said Percival, turning his hollow eyes on Brian with painful earnestness, "did I talk about you? Did I say——"

"You never mentioned my name so far as I know. So make your mind easy on that score. Now, don't talk any more: you are not fit for it. You must eat, and drink, and sleep, so as to be ready when that dilatory ship comes to take us off."

Percival did his duty in these respects. He was a more docile patient than Brian had expected to find him. But he did not seem to recover his buoyant spirits with his strength. He had long fits of melancholy brooding, in which the habitual line between his brows became more marked than ever. But it was not until two or three weeks more of their strangely monotonous existence had passed by, that Brian Luttrell got any clue to the kind of burden that was weighing upon Heron's mind.

The day had been fiercely hot, but the night was cool, and Brian had half-closed the door through which the the sea-breeze was blowing, and the light of the stars shone down. He and Percival continued to share this hut (the other being tenanted by the three seamen), and Brian was sitting on the ground, stirring up a compound of cocoa-nut milk, eggs and brandy, with

which he meant to provide Percival for supper. Percival lay, as usual, on his couch, watching his movements by the starlight. When the draught had been swallowed, Heron said :—

"Don't go to sleep yet. I wish you would sit down here. I want to say something."

Brian complied, and Percival went on in his usual abrupt fashion.

"You know I rather thought I should not get better."

"I know."

"It might have been more convenient if I had not. Did you never feel so?"

"No, never."

"If I had been buried on the Rocas Reef,' said Percival, with biting emphasis, "you would have kept your promise, gone back to England, and—married Elizabeth."

"I never considered that possibility," answered Brian, with perfect quietness and some coldness.

"Then you're a better fellow than I am. Look here," said Percival, with vehemence, "in your place I could not have nursed a man through an illness as you have done. The temptation would have been too strong: I should have killed him."

"I am sure you would have done nothing of the kind, Heron. You are incapable of treachery."

"You won't say so when you know all that I am going to tell you. Prepare your mind for deeds of villainy," said Percival, rallying his forces and trying to laugh; "for I am going to shock your virtuous ear. It's been on my mind ever since I was taken ill; and I was so afraid that I should let it out when I was light-headed, that, as you know, I asked you not to stay with me."

"Don't tell me now: I'll take it on trust. Any time will do," said Brian, shrinking a little from the allusion to his own story that he knew would follow.

"No time like the present," responded Heron, obstinately. "I've been a pig-headed brute; that's the chief thing. Now, don't interrupt, Luttrell. Miss Murray, you know, was engaged to me when you first saw her."

"Yes, but I didn't know it!" said Brian, with vehemence almost equal to Percival's own.

"Of course you didn't. I understand all that. It was the most natural thing in the world for you to admire her."

"Admire her!" repeated Brian, in an enigmatic tone.

"Let the word stand for something stronger if you don't like it. Perhaps you do not know that your friend, Dino Vasari, the man who claimed to be Brian Luttrell, betrayed your secrets to

me. It was he who told me your name and your love for Miss Murray. She had mentioned that to me, too; or rather I made her tell me."

"Dino confessed that he had been to you," said Brian, who was sitting with his hand arched over his eyes. "He had some wild idea of making a sort of compromise about the property, to which I was to be a party."

"Did he tell you the terms of the compromise?"

"No."

"Then I won't—just now. I'll tell you what I did, Luttrell, and you may call me a cad for it, if you like: I refused to do anything towards bringing about this compromise, and, although I knew when you were to sail, I did not try to detain you! You should have heard the blowing-up I had afterwards from old Colquhoun for not dropping a word to him!"

"I am very glad you did not. He could not have hindered me."

"Yes, he could. Or I could. Some of us would have hindered you, you may depend on it. And, if I had said that word, don't you see, you would never have set foot in the *Falcon* nor I in the *Arizona*, and we should both have been safe at home, instead of disporting ourselves, like Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday, on a desert island."

"It's too late to think of that now," said Brian, rather sadly.

"Too late! that's the worst of it. You've the right to reproach me. Of course, I know I was to blame."

"No, I don't see that. I don't reproach you in the least. You knew so little, that it must have seemed unnecessary to make a fuss about what you had heard."

"I heard quite enough," said Percival, with a short laugh. "I knew what I ought to do—and I didn't do it. That's the long and the short of it. If I had spoken, you would not be here. That makes the sting of it to me now."

"Don't think of that. I don't mind. You made up for all by coming after me."

"I think," said Percival, emphatically, "that if a word could have killed you when I first knew who you were, you wouldn't have had much chance of life, Luttrell. I was worse than that afterwards. If ever I had the temptation to take a man's life——"

"Keep all that to yourself," said Brian, in a quick, resolute tone. "There is no use in telling it to me. You conquered the temptation, if there was one; that I know; and if there was anything else, forget it, as I shall forget what you have told me. I have something to ask your pardon for, besides."

Percival's chest heaved; the emotion of the moment found

vent in one audible sob. He stretched out his hand, which Brian clasped in silence. For a few minutes neither of them spoke.

"It was chiefly to prove to myself that I was not such a black sheep as some persons declared me to be, that I made up my mind to follow you and bring you back," said Percival, with his old liveliness of tone. "You see I had been more selfish than anybody knew. Shall I tell you how?"

"If you like."

"You say you don't know what Dino Vasari suggested. That subtle young man made a very bold proposition. He said he would give up his claim to the property if I would relinquish my claim to Miss Murray's hand. The property and the hand thus set at liberty were both to be bestowed upon you, Mr. Brian Luttrell. Dino Vasari was then to retire to his monastery, and I to mine—that is, to my bachelor's diggings and my club—after annihilating time and space 'to make two lovers happy.'"

"Don't jest on that subject," said Brian in a low, pained tone. "What a wild idea! Poor Dino!"

"Poor me, I think, since I was to be in every sense the loser. I am sorry to say I didn't treat your friend with civility, Luttrell. After your departure, however, he went himself to Netherglen, and there, it seems, he put the finishing stroke to any claim that he might have on the property." And then Percival proceeded to relate, as far as he knew it, the story of Dino's visit to Mrs. Luttrell, its effect on Mrs. Luttrell's health, and the urgent necessity that there was for Brian to return and arrange matters with Elizabeth. Brian tried to evade the last point, but Percival insisted on it so strongly that he was obliged to give him a decisive answer.

"No," he said, at last. "I'm sorry to make it seem as if your voyage had been in vain; but, if we ever get off the Rocas Reef, I shall go on to the Brazils. There is not the least reason for me to go home. I could not possibly touch a penny of the Luttrells' money after what has happened. Miss Murray must keep it."

"But, you see, there will be legal forms to go through, even if she does keep it, for which your presence will be required."

"You don't mean that, Heron; you know I can do all that in writing."

"You won't get Miss Murray to touch a farthing of it either."

"You must persuade her," said Brian, calmly. "I think you will understand my feeling, when I say that I would rather she had it—she and you—than anybody in the world."

"You must come back. I promised to bring you back," returned Percival, with some agitation of manner. "I said that I would not go back without you."

"I will write to Mr. Colquhoun and explain."

"Confound it! What Colquhoun thinks does not signify. It is Elizabeth whom I promised."

"Well," said Brian slowly, and with some difficulty, "I think I can explain it to her, too, if you will let me write to her."

Percival suppressed a groan.

"Why should I go back?" asked Luttrell. "I see no reason."

"And I wish you did not drive me to tell you the reason," said Percival, in crabbed, reluctant tones. "But it must come, sooner or later. If you won't go for any other reason, will you go when I tell you that Elizabeth Murray cares for you as she never cared for me, and never will care for any other man in the world? That was why I came to fetch you back; and, if you don't find it a reason for going back and marrying her, why—you deserve to stop on the Rocas Reef for the remainder of your natural life!"

CHAPTER XI.

KITTY.

WINTER had come to our cold northern isles. The snow lay thick upon the ground, but a sharp frost had made it hard and crisp. It sparkled in a flood of brilliant sunshine; the air was fresh and exhilarating, the sky transparently blue. It was a pleasant day for walking, and one that Miss Kitty Heron seemed thoroughly to enjoy, as she trod the white carpet with which nature had provided the world.

She carried a little basket on her arm: a basket filled with good things for some children in a cottage not far from Strathleckie. The good things were of Elizabeth's providing; but Kitty acted as her almoner. Kitty was a very charming almoner, with her slight, graceful little figure and *mignonne* face set off by a great deal of brown fur and a dress of deep Indian red. The sharpness in the air brought a faint colour to her cheeks—Kitty was generally rather pale—and a new brightness to her pretty eyes. There was something delightfully bewitching about her: something provoking and coquettish: something of which Hugo Luttrell was pleasantly conscious as he came down the road to meet her and then walked for a little way at her side.

They did not say very much. There were a few ardent speeches from him, a vehement sort of love-making, which Kitty parried with a good deal of laughing adroitness, some saucy speeches from her which all the world might have heard, and then the cottage was reached.

"Let me go in with you," said Hugo.

"Certainly not. You would frighten the children."

"Am I so very terrible? Not to you; don't say that I frighten you."

"I should think not," said Kitty, with a little toss sideways of her dainty head. "I am frightened of nothing."

"I should think not. I should think that you were the bravest of women, as you are the most charming."

"Oh, please! I am not accustomed to these compliments. I must take my cakes to the children. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Hugo, taking her hand, and keeping it in his own while he spoke. "I may wait for you here and go back with you to Strathleckie, may I not?"

"Oh, dear, no," said Kitty. "You'll catch cold."

Then she looked down at her imprisoned hand, and up into his face, sweetly smiling all the time, and, if they had not been within sight of the cottage windows, Hugo would have taken her in his arms and kissed her there and then.

"I never catch cold. I shall walk about here till you come back. You don't dislike my company, I hope?"

It was said vehemently, with a sudden kindling of his dark eyes.

"Oh, no," answered Kitty, feeling rather frightened, in spite of her previous professions of courage, though she did not quite know why. "I shall be very pleased. I must go now." And then she vanished hastily into the cottage.

Hugo waited for some time, little guessing the fact that she was protracting her visit as much as possible, and furtively peeping through the blinds now and then in order to see if he were gone. Kitty had had some experience of his present mood, and was not certain that she liked it. But his patience was greater than hers. She was forced to come out at last, and before she had gone two steps he was at her side.

"I thought you were never going to leave that wretched hole," he said.

"Don't call it a wretched hole. It is very clean and nice. I often think that I should like to live in a cottage like that."

"With someone who loved you," said Hugo, coming nearer, and gazing into her face.

Kitty made a little *moue*.

"The cottage would only hold one person comfortably," she said.

"Then you shall not live in a cottage. You shall live in a far pleasanter place. What should you say to a little villa on the shores of the Mediterranean, with orange groves behind it, and the beautiful blue sea before? Should you like that, Kitty? You have only to say the word, and you know that it will be yours."

"Then I won't say the word," said Kitty, turning away her head. "I like Scotland better than the Mediterranean."

"Then let it be Scotland. What should you say to Netherglen?"

"I prefer Strathleckie," replied the girl, with her most provoking smile.

"That is no answer. You must give me an answer some day," said Hugo, whose voice was beginning to tremble. "You know what I mean: you know——"

"Oh, what a lovely bit of bramble in the hedge!" cried Kitty, making believe that she had not been listening. "Look, it has still a leaf or two, and the stem is frosted all over and the veins traced in silver! Do get it for me: I must take it home."

Hugo did her bidding rather unwillingly; but his sombre eyes were lighted with a reluctant smile, or a sort of glow that did duty for a smile, as she thanked him.

"It is beautiful: it is like a piece of fairies' embroidery; far more beautiful than jewels would be. Oh, I wonder how people can make such a fuss about jewels, when they are so much less beautiful than these simple, natural things."

"These will soon melt away; jewels won't melt," said Hugo. "I should like to see you with jewels on your neck and arms—you ought to be covered with diamonds."

"That is not complimentary," laughed Kitty, "it sounds as if you thought they would make me better-looking. Now, you should compliment a person on what she is, and not on what she might be."

"I have got beyond the complimentary stage," said Hugo. "What is the use of telling you that you are the most beautiful girl I ever met, or the most charming, or anything of that kind? The only thing I know"—and he lowered his voice almost to a whisper, and spoke with a fierce intensity that made Kitty shrink away from him—"the only thing I know is that you are the one woman in the world for me, and that I would sooner see you dead at my feet than married to another man!"

Kitty had turned pale: how was she to reply? She cast her eyes up and down the road in search of some suggestion. Oh, joy and relief! she saw a figure in the distance. Perhaps it was somebody from Strathleckie; they were not far from the lodge now. She spoke with renewed courage, but she did not know exactly what she said.

"Who is this coming down the road? He is going up to Strathleckie, I believe; he seems to be pausing at the gates. Oh, I hope it is a visitor. I do like having the house full; and we have been so melancholy since Percival went on that horrid expedition to Brazil. Who can it be?"

"What does it matter?" said Hugo. "Can you not listen to me for one moment? Kitty—darling—wait!"

"I can't; I really can't!" said Kitty, quickening her pace almost to a run. "Oh, Hugo—Mr. Luttrell—you must not say such things—besides—look, it's Mr. Vivian; it really is! I haven't seen him for two years."

And she actually ran away from him, coming face to face with her old friend, at the Strathleckie gates.

Hugo followed sullenly. He did not like to be repulsed in that way. And he had reasons for wishing to gain Kitty's consent to a speedy marriage. He wanted to leave the country before the return of Percival Heron, whose errand to South America he guessed pretty accurately, although Mr. Colquhoun had thought fit to leave him in the dark about it. Hugo surmised, moreover, that Dino had told Brian Luttrell the history of Hugo's conduct to him in London: if so, Brian Luttrell was the last man whom Hugo desired to meet. And if Brian returned to England with Percival, the story would probably become known to the Herons; and then how could he hope to marry Kitty? With Brian's return, too, some alteration in Mrs. Luttrell's will might possibly be expected. The old lady's health had lately shown signs of improvement: if she were to recover sufficiently to indicate her wishes to her son, Hugo might find himself deprived of all chance of Netherglen. For these reasons he was disposed to press for a speedy conclusion to the matter.

He came up to the gates, and found Kitty engaged in an animated conversation with Mr. Vivian; her cheeks were carnation, and her eyes brilliant. She was laughing with rather forced vivacity as he approached. In his opinion she had seldom appeared to more advantage; while to Rupert's eyes she seemed to have altered for the worse. Dangerously, insidiously pretty, she was, indeed; but a vain little thing, no doubt; a finished coquette by the way she talked and lifted her eyes to Hugo's handsome face; possibly even a trifle fast and vulgar. Not the simple child of sixteen whom he had last seen in Gower-street.

"Won't you come in, Hugo? I am sure everybody would be pleased to see you," said poor Kitty, unconscious of being judged, as she tried to propitiate Hugo by a pleading look. She did not like him to go away with such a cross look upon his face—that was all. But as she did not say that she would be pleased to see him, Hugo only sulked the more.

"How cross he looks! I am rather glad he is not coming in," said Kitty, confidentially, as Hugo walked away, and she

escorted Rupert up the long and winding drive. "And where did you come from? I did not know that you were near us."

"I have been staying at Lord Cecil's, thirty miles from Dunmuir. I thought that I should like to call, as you were still in this neighbourhood. I wrote to Mrs. Heron about it. I hope she received my note?"

"I see you don't know the family news," said Kitty, with a beaming smile. "I have a new stepsister, just three weeks old, and Isabel is already far too much occupied with the higher education of women to attend to such trifles as notes. She generally hands them over to Elizabeth or papa. Then, you know, papa broke one of his ribs and his collar-bone a fortnight ago, and I expect that this accident will keep us at Strathleckie for another month or two."

"That accounts for you being here so late in the year."

"Or so early! This is January, not December. But I think we may stay until the spring. It is not worth while to take a London house now."

Kitty spoke so dolefully that Rupert was obliged to smile. "You are sorry for that?" he said.

"Yes. We are all rather dull; we want something to enliven us. I hope you will enliven us, Mr. Vivian."

"I am afraid I can hardly hope to do so," said Rupert, coldly. "Of course, you have not the occupation that you used to have when you were in London."

"When I went to school! No, I should think not," said Kitty, with her giddiest laugh. "I have locked up my lesson books and thrown away the key. So you must not lecture me on my studies as you used to do, Mr. Vivian."

"I should not presume to do so," he said, with rather unnecessary stiffness.

"But you used to do it! Have you forgotten?" asked Kitty, peeping up at him archly from under her long, curling eyelashes. There was a momentary smile upon his lips, but it disappeared as he answered quietly:—

"What was allowable when you were a child, would justly be resented by you now, Miss Heron."

"I should not resent it; indeed I should not mind," said Kitty, eagerly. "I should like it: I always like being lectured, and told what I ought to do. I should be glad if you would scold me again about my reading; I have nobody to tell me anything now."

"I could not possibly take the responsibility," said Rupert. "If you have thrown away the key of your book-box, Miss Heron, I don't think that you will be anxious to find it again."

"Oh, but the lock could be picked!" cried Kitty, and then

repented her words, for Rupert's impassive face showed no interest beyond that required by politeness. The tears were very near her eyes, but she got rid of them somehow, and plunged into a neat and frosty style of conversation which she heartily detested. "This is Strathleckie; you have never seen it before, I think? It is on the Leckie property, but it is not an old place like Netherglen. I think it was built in 1840."

"Not a very good style of architecture," said Rupert, scanning it with an attentive eye.

"A good style of architecture, indeed!" commented Kitty to herself, as she ran away to her own room, after committing Mr. Vivian to the care of her stepmother, who was lying on a sofa in the drawing-room, quite ready to unfold her views about the higher education of girls. "What a piece of ice he is! He used not to be so frigid. I wonder if we offended him in any way before we left London. He has never been nice since then. Nice? He is simply hateful!" and Kitty stamped on the floor of her bed-room with alarming vehemence, but the crystal drops that had been so long repressed were trembling on her eyelashes, and giving to her face the grieved look of a child.

Meanwhile Vivian was thinking:—"What a pity she is so spoilt! A coquettish, hare-brained flirt: that is all that she is now, and she promised to be a sweet little woman two years ago! What business had she to be out walking with Hugo Luttrell? I should have heard of it if they were going to be married. I suppose she has had nobody to look after her. And yet Miss Murray always struck me as a sensible, staid kind of girl. Why can she not keep her cousin in order?" And then Rupert was conscious of a certain sense of impatience for Kitty's return, much as he disapproved of her alluring ways.

He was prevailed on to stay the night, and his visit was prolonged day after day, until it was accepted as a settled thing that he would remain for some time—perhaps even until Percival came home. It had been calculated that Percival might easily be home in February.

He could not easily maintain the coldness and reserve with which he had begun to treat Kitty Heron. There was something so winning and so childlike about her at times, that he dropped unconsciously into the old familiar tone. Then he would try to draw back, and would succeed, perhaps, in saying something positively rude or unkind, which would bring the tears to her eyes, and the flush of vexation to her face. At least, if it was not really unkind it sounded so to Kitty, and that came to the same thing. And when she was vexed, he was illogical enough to feel uncomfortable.

But Kitty's crowning offence was her behaviour at a dinner-party, on the occasion of the christening of Mrs. Heron's little girl. Hugo Luttrell and the two young Grants from Dunmuir were amongst the guests; and with them Kitty amused herself. She did not mean any harm, poor child; she chattered gaily and looked up into their faces, with a gleeful consciousness that Rupert was watching her, and that she could show him now that some people admired her if he did not. Archie Grant certainly admired her prodigiously; he haunted her steps all through the evening, hung over the piano when she sang a gay little French *chanson*; turned over a portfolio of Mr. Heron's sketches with her in a corner. On the other hand, Hugo, who took her in to dinner, whispered things to her that made her start and blush. Vivian would have liked very much to know what he said. He did not approve of that darkly handsome face, with the haggard, evil-looking eyes, being thrust so close to Kitty's soft cheeks and pretty flower-decked head. He was glad to think that he had prevailed on Angela to leave Netherglen. He was not fond of Hugo Luttrell.

He was stiffer and graver than usual that evening; not even the appearance of the newly-christened Dorothy Elizabeth, in a very long white robe, won a smile from him. He never approached Kitty—never said a word to her—until he was obliged to say good-night. And then she looked up to him with her dancing eyes and pretty smile, and said:—

"You never came near me all the evening, and you had promised to sing a duet with me."

"Is the little coquette trying her wiles on me!" thought Rupert, sternly; but aloud he answered, with grave indifference,

"You were better employed. You had your own friends."

"And are you not a friend?" cried Kitty, biting her lip.

"I am not your contemporary. I cannot enter into competition with these younger men," he answered, quietly.

Kitty quitted him in a rage. Elizabeth encountered her as she ran upstairs, her cheeks crimson, her lips quivering, her eyes filled with tears.

"My dear Kitty, what is the matter?" she said, laying a gently detaining hand on the girl's arm.

"Nothing—nothing at all," declared Kitty; but she suffered herself to be drawn into Elizabeth's room, and there, sinking into a low seat by the fire, she detailed her wrongs. "He hates me; I know he does, and I hate him! He thinks me a horrid, frivolous girl; and so I am! But he needn't tell me that he does not want to be a friend of mine!"

"Well, perhaps, you are rather too old to take him for a friend

in the way you used to do," said Elizabeth, smiling a little. "You were a child then; and you are eighteen now, you know, Kitty. He treats you as a woman: that is all. It is a compliment."

"Then I don't like his compliments: I hate them!" Kitty asseverated. "I would rather he let me alone."

"Don't think about him, dear. If he does not want to be friendly with you, don't try to be friendly with him."

"I won't," said Kitty, in the tone of one who has taken a solemn resolution. Then she rose, and surveyed herself critically in Elizabeth's long mirror. "I am sure I looked very nice," she said. "This pink dress suits me to pefection, and the lace is lovely. And then the silver ornaments! I'm glad I did not wear anything that he gave me, at any rate. I nearly put on the necklace he sent me when I was seventeen; I'm glad I did not."

"Dearest Kitty, why should you mind what he thinks?" said Elizabeth, coming to her side, and looking at the exquisitely-pretty little figure reflected in the glass, a figure to which her own, draped in black lace, formed a striking contrast. But she was almost sorry that she had said the words, for Kitty immediately threw herself on her cousin's shoulder and burst into tears. The fit of crying did not last long, and Kitty was unfeignedly ashamed of it: she dried her tears with a very useless-looking lace handkerchief, laughed at herself hysterically, and then ran away to her own room, leaving Elizabeth to wish that the sense and spirit that really existed underneath that butterfly-like exterior would show itself on the surface a little more distinctly.

But the last thing she dreamed of was that Kitty, with all her little follies, would outrage Rupert's sense of the proprieties in the way she did in the course of the following morning.

Rupert was standing alone in the drawing-room, looking out of a window which commanded an extensive view. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Heron had come downstairs. Kitty had breakfasted in her own room; Elizabeth was busy. Mr. Vivian was wondering whether it might not be as well to go back to London. It vexed him to see little Kitty Heron flirting with half-a-dozen men at once.

A voice at the door caused him to turn round. Kitty was entering, and as her hands were full, she had some difficulty in turning the handle. Rupert moved forward to assist her, and uttered a courteous good-morning, but Kitty only looked at him with flushed cheeks and wide-open resentful eyes, and made no answer.

She was wearing an embroidered apron over her dark morning

frock, and this apron, gathered up by the corners in her hands, was full of various articles which Rupert could not see. He was thoroughly taken aback, therefore, when she poured its contents in an indiscriminate heap upon the sofa, and said, in a decided tone :—

"There are all the things you ever gave me : and I would rather not keep them any longer. I take presents only from my friends."

Foolish Kitty !

CHAPTER XLI.

KITTY'S FRIENDS.

"How have I had the misfortune to offend you?" said Rupert, in a voice from which he could not banish irony as completely as he would have liked to do.

"You said so yourself," replied Kitty, facing him with the dignity of a small princess. "You said that you were not my friend now."

"When did I make that statement?" said Rupert, lifting his eyebrows.

"Last night. And I knew it. You are not kind as you used to be. It does not matter to me at all; only I felt that I did not like to keep these things—and I brought them back."

"And what am I to do with them?" said Rupert, approaching the sofa and looking at the untidy little heap. He gave a subdued laugh, which offended Kitty dreadfully.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," she said.

"Neither do I." But the smile still trembled on his finely-cut mouth. "What did you mean me to do with these things?" he asked. "These are trifles : why don't you throw them into the fire if you don't value them?"

"They are not all trifles; and I did value them before you came to see us this time," said Kitty, with a lugubriousness which ought to have convinced him of her sincerity. "There are some bangles, and a cup and saucer, and two books; and there is the chain that you sent me by Mr. Luttrell in the autumn."

"Ah, that chain," said Vivian, and then he took it up and weighed it lightly in his hand. "I have never seen you wear it. I thought at first that you had got it on last night : but my eyes deceived me. My sight is not so good as it used to be. Really, Miss Heron, you make me ashamed of my trumpery gifts : pray take them away, and let me give you something prettier on your next birthday for old acquaintance' sake."

"No, indeed!" said Kitty.

"And why not? Because I don't treat you precisely as I did when were you twelve? You really would not like it if I did. No, I shall be seriously offended if you do not take these things away and say no more about them. It would be perfectly impossible for me to take them back; and I think you will see—afterwards—that you should not have asked me to do so."

The accents of that calmly inflexible voice were terrible to Kitty. He turned to the window and looked out, but, becoming impatient of the silence, walked back to her again, and saw that her face had grown white, and was quivering as if she had received a blow. Her eyes were fixed upon the sofa, and her fingers held the chain which he had quietly placed within them; but it was evident that she was doing battle with herself to prevent the tears from falling. Rupert felt some remorse: and then hardened himself by a remembrance of the glances that had been exchanged between her and Hugo in that very room the night before.

"I am old enough to be your father, you know," he began, gravely. This statement was not quite true, but it was true enough for conversational purposes. "I have sent you presents on your birthday since you were a very little girl, and I hope I may always do so. There is no need for you to reject them, because I think it well to remember that you are not a child any longer, but a young lady who has 'come out,' and wears long frocks, and does her hair very elaborately," he said, casting a smiling glance at Kitty's carefully-frizzled head. "I certainly do not wish to cease to be friends with—all of you; and I hope you will not drive me away from a house where I have been accustomed to forget the cares of the world a little, and find pleasant companionship and relaxation."

"Oh, Mr. Vivian!" said Kitty, in a loud whisper. The suggestion that she had power to drive him away seemed almost impious. She felt completely crushed.

"Don't think any more about it," said Rupert, kindly, if condescendingly. "I never wished to be less of a friend to you than I was when you lived in Gower-street; but you must remember that you are a great deal altered from the little girl that I used to know."

Kitty could not speak; she stooped and began to gather the presents again into her apron. Vivian came and helped her. He could not forbear giving her hand a little kindly pat when he had finished, as if he had been dealing with a child. But the playful caress, if such it might be called, had no effect on Kitty's sore and angry feelings. She was terribly ashamed of herself now; she could hardly bear to remember his calmly

superior tone, his words of advice, which seemed to place her on a so much lower footing than himself.

But in a day or two this feeling wore off. He was so kindly and friendly in manner, that she was emboldened to laugh at the recollection of the tone in which he had alluded to her elaborately-dressed hair and long dresses, and to devise a way of surprising him. She came down one day to afternoon tea in an old school-girlish dress of blue serge, rather short about the ankles, a red and white pinafore, and a crimson sash. Her hair was loose about her neck; and had been combed over her forehead in the fashion in which she wore it in her childish days. Thus attired, she looked about fourteen years old, and the shy way in which she glanced at the company from under her eyelashes, added to the impression of extreme youth. To carry out the character, she held a battledore and shuttlecock in her hand.

"Kitty, are you rehearsing for a fancy ball?" said Mrs. Heron.

"No, Isabel. I only thought I would try to transform myself into a little girl again, and see what it felt like. Do I look very young indeed?"

"You look about twelve. You absurd child!"

"Is the battledore for effect, or are you going to play a game with it?" asked Rupert, who had been surveying her with cold criticism in his eyes.

"For effect, of course. Don't you think it is a very successful attempt?" she said, looking up at him saucily.

He made no answer. Elizabeth wanted the tea-kettle at that moment, and he moved to fetch it. Hugo Luttrell, however, who was paying a call at the house, was ready enough with a reply.

"It could not be more successful," he said, looking at her admiringly. "I suppose" — in a lowered tone — "that you looked like this in the school-room. I am glad those days are over, at any rate."

"I am not," said Kitty, helping herself to bread and butter. "I should like them all over again—lessons and all." She stole a glance at Rupert, but his still face betrayed no consciousness of her remark. "I am going to keep up my character. I am going to play at battledore and shuttlecock with the boys in the dining-room. Who will come, too? *Qui m'aime me suit.*"

"Then I will be the first to follow," said Hugo, in her ear.

She pouted and drank her tea, glancing half-reluctantly toward Rupert. But he would not heed.

"I will come, too," said Elizabeth, relieving the awkwardness of a rather long pause. "I always like to see you play. Kitty is

as light as a bird," she added to Mr. Vivian, who bowed and looked profoundly uninterested.

Nevertheless, in a few minutes he found the drawing-room so dull without the young people, that he, too, descended to see what was going on. He heard the sound of counting in breathless voices as he drew near the drawing-room. "Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, three hundred. One, two, three——"

"Kitty and Mr. Luttrell have kept up to three hundred and three, Mr. Vivian!" cried one of the boys as he entered the room.

Mr. Vivian joined the spectators. It was a pretty sight. Kitty, with her floating locks, flushed face, trim, light figure, and unerring accuracy of eye, was well measured against Hugo's lithe grace and dexterity. The two went on until eight hundred and twenty had been reached; then the shuttlecock fell to the ground. Kitty had glanced aside and missed her aim.

"You must try, now, Mr. Vivian," she said, advancing towards him, battledore in hand, and smiling triumphantly in his face.

"No, thank you," said Rupert, who had been shading his eyes with one hand, as if the light of the lamps had tried them: "I could not see."

"Could you not? Oh, you are short-sighted, perhaps. Ah! there go Hugo and Johnny. This is better than being grown-up, I think. Am I like the little girl that you used to know in Gower-street now, Mr. Vivian?"

It was perhaps her naming Hugo so familiarly that caused Rupert to reply, with a smile that was more cutting than reproof would have been:—

"I prefer the little girl in Gower-street still."

From the colour that instantly overspread her face and neck, he saw that she was hurt or offended—he did not know which. She left his side immediately, and plunged into the game with renewed ardour. She played until Hugo left the house about seven o'clock; and then she rushed up to her room and bolted herself in with unnecessary violence. She came down to dinner in a costume as different as possible from the one which she had worn in the afternoon. Her dress was of some shining white stuff, very long, very much trimmed, cut very low at the neck; her hair was once more tousled, curled and pinned, in its most elaborate fashion; and her gold necklet and bracelets were only fit for a dinner-party. It is to be feared that Rupert Vivian did not admire her taste in dress. If she had worn white cotton it would had pleased him better.

There was a wall between them once more. She was more conscious of it than he was, but he did not perceive that some

thing was wrong. He saw that she would not look at him, would not speak to him ; he supposed that he had offended her. He himself was aware of an increasing feeling of dissatisfaction—whether with her, or with her circumstances, he could not define—and this feeling found expression in a sentence which he addressed to her two days after the game of battledore and shuttlecock. Hugo had been to the house again, and had been even less guarded than usual in his love-making. Kitty meant to put a stop to it sooner or later; but she did not quite know how to do it (not having had much experience in these matters, in spite of the coquettishness which Rupert attributed to her), and also she did not want to do it just at present, because of her instinctive knowledge of the fact that it annoyed Mr. Vivian. She was too much of a child to know that she was playing with edged tools.

So she allowed Hugo a very long hand-clasp when he said good-bye, and held a whispered consultation with him at the door in a confidential manner, which put Rupert very much out of temper. Then she came back to the drawing-room fire, laughing a little, with an air of pretty triumph. Rupert was leaning against the mantelpiece; no one else was in the room. Kitty knelt down on the rug, and warmed her hands at the fire.

"We have such a delightful secret, Hugo and I," she said, brightly. "You would never guess what it was. Shall I tell it to you?"

"No," he answered, shortly."

"No?" She lifted her eyebrows in astonishment, and then shrugged her shoulders. "You are not very polite to me, Mr. Vivian!" she said, half-playfully, half-pettishly.

"I do not wish to share any secret that you and Mr. Hugo Luttrell may have between you," said Rupert, with emphasis.

Kitty's face changed a little. "Don't you like him?" she said, in a rather timid voice.

"Before I answer I should like to know whether you are engaged to marry him," said Mr. Vivian.

"Certainly not. I never dreamt of such a thing. You ought not to ask such a question," said Kitty, turning scarlet.

"I suppose I ought not. I beg your pardon. But I thought it was the case."

"Why should you think so?" said Kitty, turning her face away from him. "You would have heard about it, you know—and besides—nobody ever thought of such a thing."

"Excuse me: Mr. Luttrell seems to have thought of it," said Rupert, with rather an angry laugh.

"What Mr. Luttrell thinks of is no business of yours," said Kitty.

"You cannot deny it then!" exclaimed Vivian, with a mixture of bitterness and sarcastic triumph in his tone.

She made no answer. He could not see her face, but the way in which she was twisting her fingers together spoke of some agitation. He tried to master himself; but he was under the empire of an emotion of which he himself had not exactly grasped the meaning nor estimated the power. He walked to the window and back again somewhat uncertainly; then paused at about two yards' distance from her kneeling figure, and addressed her in a voice which he kept carefully free from any trace of excitement.

"I have no right to speak, I know," he said, "and, if I were not so much older than yourself, or if I had not promised to be your friend, Kitty, I would keep silence. I want you to be on your guard with that man. He is not the sort of man that you ought to encourage, or whom you would find any happiness in loving."

"I thought it was not considered generous for one man to blacken another's character behind his back," said Kitty, quickly.

"Well, you are right, it is not. If I had put myself into rivalry with Hugo Luttrell, of course, I should have to hold my tongue. But as I am only an outsider—an old friend who takes a kindly interest in the child that he has seen grow up—I think I am justified in saying, Kitty, that I do not consider young Luttrell worthy of you."

The calm, unimpassioned tones produced their usual effect on poor Kitty. She felt thoroughly crushed. And yet there was a rising anger in her heart. What reason had Rupert Vivian to hold himself so far aloof from her? Was he not Percival's friend? Why should he look down from such heights of superiority upon Percival's sister?

"I speak to you in this way," Rupert went on, with studied quietness, "because you have less of the guardianship usually given to girls of your age than most girls have. Mrs. Heron is, I know, exceedingly kind and amiable, but she has her own little ones to think of, and then she, too, is young. Miss Murray, although sensible and right-thinking in every way, is too near your own age to be a guide for you. Percival is away. Therefore, you must let me take an elder brother's place to you for once, and warn you when I see that you are in danger."

Kitty had risen from her knees, and was now standing, with her face still averted, and her lips hidden by a feather fan which she had taken from the mantelpiece. There was a sharper ring in her voice as she replied.

"You seem to think I need warning. You seem to think I cannot take care of myself. You have reminded me once or twice lately that I was a woman now and not a child. Pray, allow me the woman's privilege of choosing for myself."

"I am sorry to have displeased you," said Vivian, gravely. "Am I to understand that my warning comes too late?"

There was a moment's pause before she answered coldly:—

"Quite too late."

"Your choice has fallen upon Hugo Luttrell?"

Kitty was stripping the feathers ruthlessly from her fan. She answered with an agitated little laugh:

"That is not a fair question. You had better ask him."

"I think I do not need," said Rupert. Then, in a low and rather ironical tone, he added, "Pray accept my congratulations." She bowed her head with a scornful smile, and let him leave the room without another word. What was the use of speaking? The severance was complete between them now.

They had quarrelled before, but Kitty felt, bitterly enough, that now they were not quarrelling. She had built up a barrier between them which he was the last man to tear down. He would simply turn his back upon her now and go his own way. And she did not know how to call him back. She felt vaguely that her innocent little wiles were lost upon him. She might put on her prettiest dresses, and sing her sweetest songs, but they would never cause him to linger a moment longer by her side than was absolutely necessary. He had given her up.

She felt, too, with a great swelling of heart, that her roused pride had made her imply what was not true. He would always think that she was engaged to Hugo Luttrell. She had, at least, made him understand that she was prepared to accept Hugo when he proposed to her. And all the world knew that Hugo meant to propose—Kitty herself knew it best of all.

The day came on which Rupert was to return to London. Scarcely a word had been interchanged between him and Kitty since the conversation which has been recorded. She thought, as she stole furtive glances towards him from time to time, that he looked harrassed, and even depressed, but in manner he was more cheerful than it was his custom to be. When the time came for saying good-bye, he held out his hand to her with a kindly smile.

"Come, Kitty," he said, "let us be friends."

Her heart gave a wild leap which seemed almost to suffocate her; she looked up into his face with changing colour and eager eyes.

"I am sorry," she began, with a little gasp. "I did not mean all I said the other day, and I wanted to tell you——"

To herself it seemed as if these words were a tremendous self-betrayal; to Vivian they were less than nothing—commonplace sentences enough; uttered in a frightened, childish tone.

"Did you not mean it all?" he said, giving her hand a friendly pressure. "Well, never mind; neither did I. We are quits, are we not? I will not obtrude my advice upon you again, and you must forgive me for having already done so. Good-bye, my dear child; I trust you will be happy."

"I shall never be happy," said Kitty, withdrawing her hand from his, "never, never, never!" And then she burst into tears and rushed out of the room.

Vivian looked after her with a slightly puzzled expression, but did not attempt to call her back.

It was not a very favourable day for Hugo's suit, and he was received that afternoon in anything but a sunshiny mood by Miss Heron. For almost the first time she snubbed him unmercifully, but he had been treated with so much graciousness on all previous occasions that the snubs did not produce very much impression upon him. And, finding himself alone with her for a few minutes, he was rash enough to make the venture upon which he had set his heart, without considering whether he had chosen the best moment for the experiment or not. Accordingly, he failed. A few brief words passed between them, but the few were sufficient to convince Hugo Luttrell that he had never won Kitty Heron's heart. To his infinite surprise and mortification, she refused his offer of marriage most decidedly.

CHAPTER XLII.

A FALSE ALARM.

ANGELA'S departure from Netherglen had already taken place. Hugo was not sorry that she was gone. Her gentle words and ways were a restraint upon him: he felt obliged to command himself in her presence. And self-command was becoming more and more a difficult task. What he wanted to say or to do presented itself to him with overmastering force: it seemed foolishly weak to give up, for the sake of a mere scruple of conscience, any design on which he had set his heart. And above all things in life he desired just now to win Kitty Heron for himself.

"She has deceived me," he thought, as he sat alone on the evening of the day on which she had refused to marry him. "She made me believe that she cared for me, the little witch, and then she deliberately threw me over. I suppose she wants

to marry Vivian. I'll stop that scheme. I'll tell her something about Vivian which she does not know."

The fire before which he was sitting burnt up brightly, and threw a red glow on the dark panelling of the room, on the brocaded velvet of the old chair against which he leaned his handsome head, on the pale, but finely-chiselled, features of his face. The look of subtlety, of mingled passion and cruelty, was becoming engraved upon that face: in moments of repose its expression was evil and sinister—an expression which told its own tale of his life and thoughts. Once, in London, when he had incautiously given himself up in a public place to reflection upon his plans, an artist said to a friend as they passed him by: "That young fellow has got the very look I want for the fallen angel in my picture. There's a sort of malevolent beauty about his face which one doesn't often meet." Hugo heard the remark, and smoothed his brow, inwardly determining to control his facial muscles better. He did not wish to give people a bad impression of him. To look like a fallen angel was the last thing he desired. In society, therefore, he took pains to appear gentle and agreeable; but the hours of his solitude were stamping his face with ineradicable traces of the vicious habits, the thoughts of crime, the attempts to do evil, in which his life was passed.

The ominous look was strongly marked on his face as he sat by the fire that evening. It was not the firelight only that gave a strange glow to his dark eyes—they were unnaturally luminous, as the eyes of madmen sometimes are, and full of a painful restlessness. The old, dreamy, sensuous languor was seldom seen in their shadowy depths.

"I will win her in spite of herself," he went on, muttering the words half-aloud: "I will make her love me whether she will or no. She may fight and she may struggle, but she shall be mine after all. And before very long. Before the month is out, shall I say? Before Brian and her brother come home at any rate. They are expected in February. Yes—before February. Then, Kitty, you will be my wife."

He smiled as he said the words, but the smile was not a pleasant one.

He did not sleep much that night. He had lately grown very wakeful, and on this night he did not go to bed at all. The servants heard him wandering about the house in the early hours of the morning, opening and shutting doors, pacing the long passages, stealing up and downstairs. One of the maids put her head out of her door, and reported that the house was all lit up as if for a dance—rooms and corridors were illuminated. It was one of Hugo's whims that he could not bear the dark.

When he walked the house in this way he always lighted every lamp and candle that he could find. He fancied that strange faces looked at him in the dark.

Confusion and distress reigned next day at Netherglen. Mr. Luttrell had taken upon himself to dismiss one or two of the servants, and this was resented as a liberty by the housekeeper, who had lived there long before he had made his appearance in Scotland at all. He had paid two of the maids a month's wages in advance, and told them to leave the house within four-and-twenty hours. The household had already been considerably reduced, and the indignant housekeeper immediately announced her intention of going to Mr. Colquhoun and inquiring whether young Mr. Luttrell had been legally empowered to manage his aunt's affairs. And seeing that this really was her intention, Hugo smiled and spoke her fair.

"You're a little hard on me, Mrs. Shairp," he said, in dulcet tones. "I was going to speak to you privately about these arrangements. You, of course, ought never to go away from Netherglen, and, whoever goes, you shall not. You must be here to welcome Mr. Brian when he comes home again, and to give my wife a greeting when I bring her to Netherglen—which I hope I shall do very shortly."

"An' wha's the leddy, Maister Hugo?" said the housekeeper, a little mollified by his words. "It'll be Miss Murray, maybe? The mistress liked the glint of her bonny een. 'Jean,' she said to me, the day Miss Murray cam' to pay her respects, 'Jean, yon lassie steps like a princess.' Ye'll be nae sae far wrang, Maister Hugo, if it's Miss Murray that ye mak' your bride."

"It is not Miss Murray," said Hugo, carelessly; "it is her cousin, Miss Heron."

Mrs. Shairp's eyebrows expressed astonishment and contempt, although her lips murmured only—"That wee bit lassie!" But she made no further objection to the plan which Hugo now suggested to her. He wanted her not to leave Mrs. Luttrell's service (or so he said), but to take a few weeks' holiday. She had a sister in Aberdeen—could she not pay this sister a visit? Mrs. Luttrell should have every care during the housekeeper's absence—two trained nurses were with her night and day; and a Miss Corcoran, a cousin of the Luttrell family, was shortly expected. Mr. Colquhoun had spoken to him about the necessity of economy, and for that reason he wished to reduce the number of servants as much as possible. He was going away to London, and there would be no need of more than one servant in the house. In fact, the gardener and his wife could do all that would be required.

"Me leave my mistress to the care o' John Robertson and his wife!" ejaculated the housekeeper, indignantly.

Whereupon Hugo had to convince her that Mrs. Luttrell was perfectly safe in the hands of the two nurses—at any rate for a week. During that week, one or two necessary alterations could be made in the house—there was a water-pipe and a drain that needed attention, in Hugo's opinion—and this could be done while the house was comparatively empty—"before Brian came home." With this formula he never failed to calm Mrs. Shairp's wrath and allay her rising fears.

For she had fears. She did not know why Mr. Hugo seemed to want her out of the way. She fancied that he had secret plans which he could not carry out if the house were full of servants. She tried every possible pretext for staying at home, but she felt herself worsted at all points when it came to matters of argument. She did not like to appeal to Mr. Colquhoun. For she knew, as well as everybody in the county knew, that Mrs. Luttrell had made Hugo the heir to all she had to leave; and that before very long he would probably be the master of Netherglen. As a matter of fact, he was even now virtually the master, and she had gone beyond her duty, she thought, in trying to argue with him. She did not know what to do, and so she succumbed to his more persistent will. After all, she had no reason to fear that anything would go wrong. She said that she would go for a week or ten days, but not for a longer time. "Well, well," said Hugo, in a soothing tone, as if he were making a concession, "come back in a week, if you like, my good Mrs. Shairp. You will find the house very uncomfortable—that is all. I am going to turn painters and decorators loose in the upper rooms; the servants' quarters are in a most dilapidated condition."

"If the penters are coming in, it's just the time that I sud be here, sir," said Mrs. Shairp, firmly, but respectfully. And Hugo smiled an assent.

As a matter of fact he had got all he wanted. He wanted Mrs. Shairp out of the house for a week or ten days. For that space of time he wished to have Netherglen to himself. She announced, after some hesitation, that she would leave for Aberdeen on the twenty-eighth, and that she should stay a week, or at the most, a day or two longer. "She's safe for a fortnight," said Hugo to himself with a triumphant smile. He had other preparations to make, and he set to work to make them steadily.

It was a remark made by Kitty herself at their last interview that had suggested to his mind the whole mad scheme to which he was devoting his mental powers. It all hinged upon the fact

that Kitty was going to spend a week with some friends in Edinburgh—friends whom Hugo knew only by name. She went to them on the twenty-seventh. Mrs. Shairp left Netherglen on the twenty-eighth. Two hours after Mrs. Shairp had started on her journey the two remaining servants were dismissed. The plumber, who had been severely inspected and cautioned as to his behaviour that morning by Mrs. Shairp, was sent about his business. One of the nurses was also discharged. The only persons left in the house beside Mrs. Luttrell, the solitary nurse, and Hugo himself, were two; a young kitchen-maid, generally supposed to be somewhat deficient in intellect, and a man named Stevens, whom Hugo had employed at various times in various capacities, and characterised (with rather an odd smile) as "a very useful fellow." The nurse who remained, protested vigorously against this state of affairs, but was assured by Hugo in the politest manner, that it would last only for a day or two, that he regretted it as much as she did, that he would telegraph to Edinburgh for another nurse immediately. What could the poor woman do? She was obliged to submit to circumstances. She could no more withstand Hugo's smiling, than she liked to refuse—in despite of all rules—the handsome gratuity that he slid into her hand.

Meanwhile, Kitty was trying to forget her past sorrows in the society of some newly-made friends in Edinburgh. Here, if anywhere, she might forget that Rupert Vivian had despised her, and that Hugo Luttrell accused her of being a heartless coquette. She was not heartless—or, at least, not more so than girls of eighteen usually are—but, perhaps, she was a little bit of a coquette. Of course, she had acted foolishly with respect to Vivian and Hugo Luttrell. But her foolishness brought its own punishment.

It was on the second day of her visit that a telegram was brought to her. She tore it open in some surprise, exclaiming:—

"They must have had news of Percival!"

Then she read the message and turned pale.

"What is it?" said one of her friends, coming to her side.

Kitty held out the paper for her to read.

"Elizabeth Murray, Queen's Hotel, Muirside, to Miss Heron, Merchiston Terrace, Edinburgh. Your father has met with a serious accident, and is not able to move from Muirside. He wishes you to come by the next train, which leaves Edinburgh at four-thirty. You shall be met at the Muirside Station either by Hugo or myself."

"There is time for me to catch the train, is there not?" said Kitty, jumping up, with her eyes full of tears.

"Oh, yes, dear, yes, plenty of time. But who is to go with you?" said Mrs. Baxter, rather nervously. "I am so sorry John is not at home; but there is scarcely time to let him know."

"I can go perfectly well by myself," said Kitty. "You must put me into the train at the station, Mrs. Baxter, under the care of the guard, if you like, and I shall be met at Muirside."

"Where is Muirside?" asked Jessie Baxter, a girl of Kitty's age.

"Five miles from Dunmuir. I suppose papa was sketching or something. Oh! I hope it is not a very bad accident!" said Kitty, turning great, tearful eyes first on Mrs. Baxter, and then on the girls. "What shall we do! I must go and get ready instantly."

They followed her to her room, and anxiously assisted in the preparations for her journey, but even then Mrs. Baxter could not refrain from inquiring:—

"Who is the person who is to meet you? 'Hugo'—do you know him?"

"Oh, yes, he is Elizabeth's cousin, and Elizabeth is my cousin. We are connections you see. I know him very well," said Kitty, with a blush, which Mrs. Baxter remembered afterwards.

"I would go with you myself," she said, "if it were not for the cold, but I am afraid I should be laid up with bronchitis if I went."

"Let Janet go, mamma," cried one of the girls.

"I don't want Janet, indeed, I don't want her," said Kitty, earnestly. "I am much obliged to you, Mrs. Baxter, but, indeed, I can manage quite well by myself. It is quite a short journey, only two-hours-and-a-half; and it would be a pity to take her, especially as she could not get back to-night."

She carried her point, and was allowed to depart without an attendant. Mrs. Baxter went with her to the station, and put her under the care of the guard who promised to look after her.

"You will write to us, Kitty, and tell us how Mr. Heron is," said Mrs. Baxter, before the train moved off.

"Yes, I will telegraph," said Kitty, "as soon as I reach Muirside."

"Do, dear. I hope you will find him better. Take care of yourself," and then the train moved out of the station, and Mrs. Baxter went home.

Kitty's journey was a perfectly uneventful one, and would have been comfortable enough but for the circumstances under which she made it. The telegram lay upon her lap, and she read it over and over again with increasing alarm as she noticed its careful vagueness, which seemed to her the worst sign of all. She was heartily relieved when she found that she was nearing Muirside:

the journey had never seemed so long to her before. It was, indeed, longer than usual, for the railway line was in some places partly blocked with snow, and eight o'clock was past before Kitty reached Muirside. She looked anxiously out of the window, and saw Hugo Luttrell on the platform before the train had stopped. He sprang up to the step, and looked at her for a moment without speaking. Kitty had time to think that the expression of his face was odd before he replied to her eager questions about her father.

"Yes, he is a little better; he wants to see you," said Hugo at last.

"But how has he hurt himself? Is he seriously ill? Oh, Hugo, do tell me everything. Anything is better than suspense."

"There is no need for such great anxiety; he is a great deal better, quite out of danger," Hugo answered, with a rather strange smile. "I will tell you more as we go up to the house. Don't be afraid."

And then the guard came up to assure himself of the young lady's safety, and to receive his tip. Hugo made it a large one. Kitty's luggage was already in the hands of a man whom she thought she recognised: she had seen him once or twice with Hugo, and once when she paid a state-call at Netherglen. Just as she was leaving the station, a thought occurred to her, and she turned back.

"I said I would telegraph to Mrs. Baxter as soon as I reached Muirside. Is it too late?"

"The office is shut, I think."

"I am so sorry! She will be anxious."

"Not if you telegraph first thing in the morning," said Hugo, soothingly. "Or—stay: I'll tell you what you can do. Come with me here, into the waiting-room—now you can write your message on a leaf of my pocket-book, and we will leave it with the station-master, to be sent off as soon as possible."

"What shall I say?" said Kitty, sitting down at the painted deal table, which was sparsely adorned with a water-bottle and a tract, and chafing her little cold hands. "Do write it for me, Hugo, please. My fingers are quite numb."

"Poor little fingers! You will be warmer soon," said Hugo, with more of his usual manner. "I will write in your name then. 'Arrived safely and found my father much better, but will write in a day or two and give particulars.' That does not tie you down, you see. You may be too busy to write to-morrow."

"Thank you. It will do very nicely."

She was left for a few minutes, whilst he went to the station-

master with the message, and she took the opportunity of looking at herself in the glass above the mantelpiece, partly in order to see whether her bonnet was straight, partly in order to escape the stare of the waiting-room woman, who seemed to take a great deal of interest in her movements. Kitty was rather vexed when Hugo returned, to hear him say, in a very distinct tone :—

"Come, dearest. We shall be late if we don't set off at once."

"Hugo!" she ejaculated, as she met him at the door.

"What is it, dear? What is wrong?"

It seemed to her that he made his words still more purposely distinct. The woman in the waiting-room came to the door, and gazed after them as they moved away towards the carriage which stood in waiting. They made a handsome pair, and Hugo looked particularly lover-like as he gave the girl his arm and bent his head to listen to what she had to say. But Kitty's words were not loving; they were only indignant and distressed.

"You should not speak to me in that way," she said.

But Hugo laughed and pressed her arm as he helped her into the carriage. The man Stevens was already on the box. Hugo entered with her, closed the door and drew up the window. The carriage drove away into the darkness of an unlighted road, and disappeared from the sight of a knot of gazers collected round the station door.

"It's like a wedding," said the woman of the waiting-room, as she turned back to the deal table with the water bottle and the tract. "Just like a wedding."

Mrs. Baxter received her telegram next morning, and was comforted by it. She noticed that the message was dated from Muirside Station, and that she must, therefore, wait until Kitty sent the promised letter before she wrote to Kitty, as she did not know where Mr. Heron might be staying. But as the days passed on and nothing more was heard, she addressed a letter of inquiry to Kitty at Strathleckie. To her amaze it was sent back to Merchiston Terrace, as if the Herons thought that Kitty was still with her, and a batch of letters with the Dunmuir postmark began to accumulate on the Baxters' table. Finally there came a postcard from Elizabeth, which Mrs. Baxter took the liberty of reading.

"DEAR KITTY," it ran, "why do you not write to us? When are you coming back? We shall expect you on Saturday, if we hear nothing to the contrary from you. Uncle Alfred will meet you at Dunmuir."

"There is something wrong here," gasped poor Mrs. Baxter.

"What has become of that child if she is not with her friends? What does it mean?"

CHAPTER XLIII.

TRAPPED.

No sooner had the carriage door closed, than Kitty began to question her companion about the accident to her father. Hugo replied with evident reluctance—a reluctance which only increased her alarm. She began to shed tears at last, and implored him to tell her the whole story, repeating that "anything would be better than suspense."

"I cannot say more than I have done," said Hugo, in a muffled voice. "You will know soon—and, besides, as I have told you, there is nothing for you to be alarmed at; indeed there is not. Do you think I would deceive you in that?"

"I hope not," faltered Kitty. "You are very kind."

"Don't call it kindness. You know that I would do anything for you." Then, noticing that the vehemence of his tone made her shrink away from him, he added more calmly, "you will soon understand why I am acting in this way. Wait for a little while and you will see."

She was silent for a few minutes, and then said in a subdued tone:—

"You frighten me, Hugo, by telling me that I shall know—soon; that I shall see—soon. What are you hiding from me? You make me fancy terrible things. My father is not—not—dying—dead? Hugo, tell me the truth."

"I solemnly assure you, Kitty, that your father is not even in danger."

"Then someone else is ill?"

"No, indeed. Be patient for a little time, and you shall see them all."

Kitty clasped her hands together with a sigh, and resigned herself to her position. She leaned back in the comfortably-cushioned seat for a time, and then roused herself to look out of the window. The night was a dark one: she could see little but vague forms of tall trees on either hand, but she felt by the motion of the carriage that they were going up-hill.

"We have not much further to go, have we?" she asked.

"Some distance, I am sorry to say. Your father was removed to a farmhouse four miles from the station—the house nearest the scene of the accident."

"Four miles!" faltered Kitty. "I thought that it was close to the station"

"Is it disagreeable to you to drive so far with me?" said Hugo. "I will get out and sit on the box if you do not want me."

"Oh, no, I should not like you to do that," said Kitty. But in her heart, she wished that she had brought Mrs. Baxter's Janet.

Her next question showed some uneasiness, though of what kind Hugo could not exactly discover.

"Whose brougham is this?"

"Mrs. Luttrell's. I borrowed it for the occasion."

"You are very good. I could easily have come in a fly."

"Don't say you would rather have done so," said Hugo, allowing his voice to fall into a caressing murmur. But either Kitty did not hear, or was displeased by this recurrence to his old habit of saying lover-like things; for she gazed blankly out of the window, and made no reply.

After an hour's drive, the carriage turned in at some white gates, and stopped in a paved courtyard surrounded by high walls. Kitty gazed round her, thinking that she had seen the place before, but she was not allowed to linger. Hugo hurried her through a door into a stone hall, and down some dark passages, cautioning her from time to time to make no noise. Once Kitty tried to draw back. "Where is Elizabeth?" she said. "Is not Isabel here? Why is everything so still?"

Hugo pointed to the end of the corridor in which they stood. A nurse, in white cap and apron, was going from one room to another. She did not look round, but Kitty was reassured by her appearance. "Is papa there?" she said in a whisper. "Is this the farmhouse?"

"Come this way," said Hugo, pointing with his finger to a narrow wooden staircase before them. Kitty obeyed him without a word. Her limbs trembled beneath her with fatigue, and cold, and fear. It seemed to her that Hugo was agitated, too. His face was averted, but his voice had an unnatural sound.

They mounted two flights of stairs and came out upon a narrow landing, where there were three doors: one of them a thick baize door, the others narrow wooden ones. Hugo opened one of the wooden doors and showed a small sitting-room, where a meal was laid, and a fire spread a pleasant glow over the scene. The other door opened upon another narrow flight of stairs, leading, as Kitty afterwards ascertained, to a small bed-room.

"Where is papa?" said Kitty, glancing hurriedly around her. "He cannot be on this floor surely? Please take me to him at once, Mr. Luttrell."

"What have I done that I should be called Mr. Luttrell?" said Hugo, who was pulling off his fur gloves and standing with his back to the door. There was a look of triumph upon his face, which Kitty thought very insolent, and could not understand. "We are cousins after a fashion, are we not? You must eat and drink after your journey before you undergo any agitation. There is a room prepared for you upstairs, I believe. This meal seems to have been made ready for me as well as for you, however. Let me give you a glass of wine."

He walked slowly towards the table as he spoke.

"I do not want anything," said Kitty, impatiently. "I want to see my father. Where are the people of the house?"

"The people of the house? You saw the nurse just now. I will go and ascertain, if you like, whether the patient can be seen or not."

"Let me come with you."

"I think not," said Hugo, slowly. "No, I will not trouble you to do that. I will be back in a moment or two. Excuse me."

He made his exit very rapidly. From the sound that followed, it seemed that he had gone through the baize door. After a moment's hesitation Kitty followed and laid her hand on the brass handle. But she pushed in vain. There was no latch and no key to be seen, but the door resisted her efforts; and, as she stood hesitating, a man came up the narrow stair which she had mounted on her way from the courtyard, and forced her to retreat a step or two. He was carrying her box and handbag.

"This door is difficult to open," said Kitty. "Will you please open it for me?"

The man, Hugo's factotum, Stevens, gave her an odd glance as he set down his burden.

"The door won't open from this side unless you have the key, miss," he said.

"Not open from this side? Then I must have the key," said Kitty, decidedly.

"Yes, miss." Steven's tone was perfectly respectful, and yet Kitty felt that he was laughing at her in his sleeve. "Mr. Luttrell, perhaps, can get you the key, miss."

"Yes, I suppose so. Put the box down, please. No, it need not be uncorded until I know whether I shall stay the night."

The man obeyed her somewhat imperiously-uttered commands with an air of careful submission. He then went down the dark stairs. Kitty heard his footsteps for some little distance. Then came the sound of a closing door, and the click of a key in the lock. Then silence. Was she locked in? She wished that the baize door had not been closed, and she chid herself for nervous-

ness. Hugo had shut it accidentally—it would be all right when he came back. Excited and fearful as she was, she chose to fortify herself against the unknown, by swallowing a biscuit and a draught of black coffee. When this was done she felt stronger in every way—morally as well as physically. She had been faint for want of food.

Would Hugo never come back? He was absent a quarter-of-an-hour: she verified that fact by reference to a little enamelled watch which Elizabeth had given her on her last birthday. She had taken off her hat and cloak, and smoothed her rebellious locks into something like order before he returned.

"Why have you been so long?" she said, rather plaintively, when the door moved at last. "And, oh, please, if I am to stop here at all, will you find out whether I can have the key of that door? The man who brought up my boxes says it will not open from this side, and I cannot bear to feel that I am shut in. May I go to papa, now?"

"You do not like being a prisoner, do you?" said Hugo, totally ignoring her last question. "So much the better for you—so much the better for me."

Kitty recoiled a little. She did not know what had happened to him, but she saw that his face expressed some mood which she had never seen it express before. It was flushed, and his eyes glittered with an unnatural light. And surely there was a faint odour of brandy in the room which had not been there before his entrance! She recoiled from him, but she was brave enough to show no other sign of fear.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, "but I know that I want to go to my father. Please put an end to this mystery and take me to him at once."

"Yes, I will put an end to the mystery," said Hugo, drawing nearer to her, and putting out his hands as if he wished to take hers. "There is more of a mystery than you can guess, but there shall be one no longer. Ah, Kitty, won't you forgive me when I tell you what I have done? It was for your sake that I have sunk to these depths—or risen to these heights, I hardly know which to call them—for your sake, because I love you, love you as no other woman in the world, Kitty, was ever loved before!"

He threw himself down on his knees before her, in passionate self-abasement, and lifted his ardent eyes pleadingly to her face.

"Kitty, forgive me," he said. "Tell me that you forgive me before I tell you what I have done."

Kitty had turned very pale. "What have you done?" she asked. "How can I forgive you if I do not know what to for

give? Pray get up, Hugo; I cannot bear to see you acting in this way."

"How can I rise till I have confessed?" said Hugo, seizing one of her hands and pressing it to his lips. "Ah, Kitty, remember that it was all because I loved you! You will not be too hard upon me, darling? Tell me that you love me a little, and then I shall not despair."

"But, I do not love you; I told you so before," said Kitty, trying hard to draw away her hand. "And it is wicked of you to say these things to me here and now. Where is my father? Take me to him at once."

"Oh, my dearest, be kind and good to me," entreated Hugo. "Can you not guess?—then how can I tell you?—your father is well—as well as ever he was in his life."

"Well?" cried Kitty. "Then was it a mistake? Was it some one else who was hurt? Who sent the telegram?"

"I sent the telegram. I wanted you here."

"Then it was a trick—a hoax—a lie? How dare you, sir! And why have you brought me here? What is this place?"

"This place, Kitty, is Netherglen."

"Netherglen!" said Kitty, in a relieved tone of voice. "Oh, it is not so very far from home."

Then she turned sharply upon him with a flash in her eye that he had never seen before.

"You must let me go home at once; and you will please understand, Mr. Luttrell, that I wish to have no further intercourse with you of any sort. After the cruel and unkind and useless trick that you have played upon me, you must see that you have put an end to all friendship between yourself and my family. My father will call you to account for it."

Kitty spoke strongly and proudly. Her eyes met his undauntedly: her head was held high, her step was firm as she moved towards the door. If she trembled internally, she showed at least no sign of fear.

"Ah, I knew that you would be angry at first," said Hugo; "but you will listen to me, and you will understand——"

"I will not listen. I do not want to understand," cried Kitty, with a slight stamp of her little foot. "'Angry at first!' Do you think I shall ever forgive you? I shall never see you nor speak to you again. Let me pass."

Hugo had still been kneeling, but he now rose to his feet and confronted her. The flush was dying out of his face, but his eyes retained their unnatural brightness still.

"You cannot pass that door just yet," he said, with sudden, dangerous calmness. "You must wait until I let you go. You

ask if I think you will ever forgive me? Yes, I do. You say you will never see me or speak to me again? I say that you will see me many times, and speak to me in a very different tone before you leave Netherglen."

"Be kind enough to stand out of the way and open the door for me," said Kitty, with supreme contempt. "I do not want to hear any more of this nonsense."

"Nonsense, do you call it? You will give it a very different name before long, my fair Kitty. Do you think I am in play? Do you think I should risk—what I have risked, if I meant to gain nothing by it? I am in sober, solemn earnest, and know very well what I am doing, and what I want to gain."

"What can you gain," said Kitty, boldly facing him, "except disgrace and punishment? What do you think my father will say to you for bringing me away from Edinburgh on false pretences? What will you tell my brother when he comes home?"

"As for your brother," said Hugo, with a sneer, "he is not very likely to come home again at all. His ship has been wrecked, and all lives lost. As for your father——"

He was interrupted by a passionate cry from the girl's pale lips.

"Wrecked! Percival's ship lost! Oh, it cannot be true!"

"It is true enough—at least report says so. It may be a false report!"

"It must be a false report! You would not have the heart to tell me the news so cruelly if it were true! But no, I forgot. You made me believe that my father was dying; you do not mind being cruel. Still, I don't believe you. I shall never again believe a word you say. Oh! Percival, Percival!" And then, to prove how little she believed him, Kitty burst into tears, and pressed her handkerchief to her face. Hugo stood and watched her earnestly, and she, on looking up, found his eyes fixed upon her. The gaze brought back all her ire. "Order the carriage for me at once, and let me go out of your sight," she said. "I cannot bear to look at you!"

Kitty was not dignified in her wrath, but she was so pretty that Hugo's lips curled with a smile of enjoyment. At the same time he felt that he must bring her to a sense of her position. She had not as yet the least notion of what he meant to require of her. And it would be better that she should understand. He folded his arms and leant against the door as he spoke.

"You are not going away just yet," he said. "I have got my pretty bird caged at last, and she may beat her wings against the bars as much as she pleases, but she will not leave her cage until she is a little tamer than she is now. When she can sing to the tune I will teach her, I will let her go."

"What do you mean?" said Kitty. "Stand away from the door, Mr. Luttrell. I want to pass."

"I will stand aside presently and let you go—as far as the doors will let you. But just now you must listen to me."

"I will not listen. I will call the servants," she said, pulling a bell-handle which she had found beside the mantelpiece.

"Ring as much as you please. Nobody will come. The bell-wire has been cut."

"Then I will call. Somebody must hear."

"My man, Stevens, may hear, perhaps. But he will not come unless I summon him."

"But the other servants——"

"There are no other servants in this part of the house. The kitchen-maid and the nurse sleep close to Mrs. Luttrell's room—so far away that not your loudest scream would reach their ears. You are in my power, Kitty. I could kill you if I liked, and nobody could interfere."

What strange light was that within his eyes? Was it the light of madness or of love? For the first time Kitty was seized with positive fear of him. She listened, the colour dying out of her face, and her eyes slowly dilating with terror as she heard what he had to say.

"I will tell you now what I have done," he said, "and then I will ask you, once more, to forgive me. It is your own fault if I love you madly, wildly, as I do. You led me on. You let me tell you that I loved you; you seemed to care for me too, sometimes. By the time that you had made up your mind, to throw me over, Kitty, my love had grown into a passion that must be satisfied. There are two ways in which it can end, and two only. I might kill you—other men of my race have killed the women who trifled with them and deceived them. I could forgive you for what you have made me suffer, if I saw you lying dead at my feet, child; that is the first way. And the second—be mine—be my wife; that is the better way."

"Never!" said Kitty, firmly, although her white lips quivered with an unspoken fear. "Kill me, if you like. I would rather be killed than be your wife now."

"Ah, but I do not want to kill you!" cried Hugo, his dark face lighting up with a sudden glow, which made it hatefully brilliant and beautiful, even in Kitty's frightened eyes. He left the door and came towards her, holding out his hands and gesticulating as he spoke. "I want you to be my wife, my own sweet flower, my exquisite bird, for whom no cage can be half too fine! I want you to be mine; my own darling——. I would give Heaven and earth for that: I have already risked all that

makes life worth living. Men love selfishly; but you shall be loved as no other woman was ever loved. You shall be my queen, my angel, my wife!"

"I will die first," said Kitty. Before he could interpose, she snatched a knife from the table, and held it with the point turned towards him. "Come a step nearer," she cried, "and I shall know how to defend myself."

Hugo stopped short. "You little fool!" he said, angrily. "Put the knife down."

She thought that he was afraid; and, still holding her weapon, she made a rush for the door; but Hugo caught her skilfully by the wrists, disarmed her, and threw the knife to the other end of the room. Then he made her sit down in an arm-chair near the fire, and without relaxing his hold upon her arm, addressed her in cool but forcible tones.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said. "You need not be so frightened or so foolish. I won't come near you, unless you give me leave. I am going to have your full and free consent, my little lady, before I make you my wife. But, this I want you to understand. I have you here—a prisoner; and a prisoner you will remain until you do consent. Nobody knows where you are—nobody will look for you here. You cannot escape; and if you could escape, nobody would believe your story. Do you hear?"

He took away his hand from her arm. But she did not try to move. She was trembling from head to foot. He looked at her silently for a little time, and then withdrew to the door.

"I will leave you now until to-morrow," he said, quietly. "There is a girl—a kitchen-maid—who will bring you your breakfast in the morning. You have this little wing of the house entirely to yourself, but I don't think that you will find any means of getting out of it. Good-night, my darling. You will forgive me yet."

CHAPTER XLIV.

HUGO'S VICTORY.

KITTY remained for some time in the state in which Hugo left her. She was only faintly conscious of his departure. The shutting of the baize door, and of another door beyond it, scarcely penetrated to her brain. She fancied that Hugo was still standing over her with a wild light in his eyes and the sinister smile upon his lips; and she dared not look up to see if the fancy were true. A sick, faint feeling came over her, and made her all the more disinclined to move.

The fire, which had been burning hollow and red, fell in at last with a great crash; and the noise startled her into full consciousness. She sat erect in her chair, and looked about her fearfully. No, Hugo was not there. He had left the door of the room a little way open. With a shuddering desire to protect herself, she staggered to the door, closed it, looked for a key or a bolt, and found none; then sank down again upon a chair, and tried seriously to consider the position in which she found herself.

There was not much comfort to be gained out of the reflections which occurred to her. If she was as much in Hugo's power as he represented her to be, she was in evil case, indeed. She thought over the arrangements which he seemed to have planned so carefully, and she saw that they were all devised so as to make it appear that she had been in the secret, that she had met him and gone away with him willingly. And her disappearance might not be made known for days. Mrs. Baxter would suppose that she was with her relations; her relations would think that she was still in Edinburgh. Inquiries might be made in the course of three or four days; but even if they were made so soon, they would probably be fruitless. The woman at the waiting-room, whose stare Kitty had resented, would perhaps give evidence that the gentleman had called her his "dearest," and taken her away with him in his carriage. She thought it all too likely that Hugo had planned matters so as to make everybody believe that she had eloped with him of her own free-will.

If escape were only possible! Surely there was some window, some door, by which she could leave the house! She would not mind a little danger. Better a broken bone or two than the fate which would await her as Hugo's wife—or as Hugo's prisoner. She turned to the window with a resolute step, drew aside the curtains, unbarred the shutters, and looked out.

Disappointment awaited her. There was a long space of wall, and then the pointed roofs of some outhouses, which hid the courtyard and the road entirely from her sight. Beyond the roofs she could see the tops of trees, which, it was plain, would entirely conceal any view of her window from passers-by. It would be quite impossible to climb down to those sharp-gabled roofs; and, as if to make assurance doubly sure, the window was protected by strong iron bars, between which nobody could have squeezed more than an arm or foot. Moreover, the sash was nailed down. Kitty dropped the curtain with a despairing sigh.

After a little hesitation, she took a candle and opened the sitting-room door. All was dark in the passage outside; but

from the top of the flight of stairs leading to a higher storey, she could distinguish a glimmer of light which seemed to come from a window in the roof. She went up the stairs and found two tiny rooms; one a lumber-room, the other a bed-room. These were just underneath the roof, and had tiny triangular windows, which were decidedly too small to allow of anyone's escaping through them. Kitty peered through them both, and got a good view of the loch, glimmering whitely in the starlight between its black, wooded shores. She retraced her steps, and explored an empty room on the floor with her sitting-room, the window of which was also barred and nailed down. Then she went down the lower flight of steps until she came to a closed door, which had been securely fastened from the outside by the man who brought up her box. She shook it and beat it with her little fists; but all in vain. Nobody seemed to hear her knocks; or, if heard, they were disregarded. She tried the baize door with like ill-success. Hugo had said the truth; she was a prisoner.

At last, tired and disheartened, she crept back to her sitting-room. The fire was nearly out, and the night was a cold one. She muffled herself in her cloak and crouched down upon the sofa, crying bitterly. She thought herself too nervous, too excited, to sleep at all; and she certainly did not sleep for two or three hours. But exhaustion came at last, and, although she still started at the slightest sound, she fell into a doze, and thence into a tolerably sound slumber, which lasted until daylight looked in at the unshuttered window, and the baize door moved upon its hinges to admit the girl who was to act as Miss Heron's maid.

The very sight of a girl—a woman like herself—brought hope to Kitty's mind. She started up, pressing her hands to her brow and pushing back the disordered hair. Then she addressed the girl with eager, persuasive words. But the kitchen-maid only shook her head. "Dinna ye ken that I'm stane-deef?" she said, pointing to her ears with a grin. For a moment Kitty in despair desisted from her efforts. Then she thought of another argument. She produced her purse, and showed the girl some sovereigns, then led her to the door, intimating by signs that she would give her the money if she would but open it. The girl seemed to understand, but laughed again and shook her head. "Na, na," she said. "I daurna lat ye oot sae lang's the maister's here." Hugo's coadjutors were apparently incorruptible.

The kitchen-maid proved herself equal to all the work required of her. She relighted the fire, cleared away the uneaten supper, and brought breakfast and hot water. Kitty discovered that

everything she required was handed to the girl through a sliding panel in the door at the bottom of the stairs. There was no chance of escape through any chance opening of the door.

She had no appetite, but she knew that she ought to eat in order to keep up her strength and courage. She therefore drank some coffee, and ate the scones which the maid brought her. The girl then took away the breakfast-things, put fresh fuel on the fire, and departed by the lower door. Kitty would have kept her if she could. Even a deaf kitchen-maid was better than no company at all.

The view from the windows was no more encouraging by day than night. There seemed to be no way of communicating with the outer world. A letter flung from either storey would only reach the slanting roofs below, and lie on the slates until destroyed by snow and rain. Kitty doubted whether her voice would reach the courtyard, even if she raised it to its highest pitch. She tried it from the attic window, but it seemed to die away in the heights, and she could hardly hope that it had been heard by anyone either inside or outside the house.

She was left alone for some time. About noon, as she was standing by her window, straining her eyes to discover some trace of a human being in the distance, whose attention she perhaps might catch if one could only be seen, she heard the door open and close again. She knew the footstep: it was neither that of the deaf girl nor of the man Stevens. It was Hugo Luttrell coming once more to plead his cause or lay his commands upon her.

She turned round unwillingly and glanced at him with a faint hope that the night might have brought him to some change of purpose. But although the excitement of the previous evening had disappeared, there was no sign of relenting in his face. He came up to her and tried to take her hand.

"*Nuit porte conseil*," he began. "Have you thought better of last night's diversions? Have you arrived at any decision yet?"

"Oh, Hugo," she burst out, clasping her hands, "don't speak to me in that sneering, terrible way. Have a little pity upon me. Let me go home!"

"You shall go home to-morrow, if you will go as my wife, Kitty."

"But you know that can never be," she expostulated. "How can you expect me to be your wife after all that you have made me suffer? Do you think I could ever love you as a wife should do? You would be miserable; and I—I—should break my heart!" She burst into tears as she concluded, and wrung her hands together.

"Why did you make me suffer if you want me to pity you now?" said Hugo, in a low, merciless tone. "You used me shamefully: you know you did. I swore then to have my revenge; and I have it now. For every one of the tears you shed now, I have shed drops of my heart's blood. It is nothing to me if you suffer: your pain is nothing to what mine was when you cast me off like an old glove because your fancy had settled on Rupert Vivian. You shall feel your master now: you shall be mine and mine only; not his, nor any other's. I will have my revenge."

"My fancy had settled on Rupert Vivian!" repeated Kitty, with a sudden rush of colour to her face. "Ah, how little you know about it! Rupert Vivian is far above me: he does not care for me. You have no business to speak of him."

"He does not care for you, but you are in love with him," said Hugo, looking at her from between his narrowed eyelids with a long penetrating gaze. "I understand."

Kitty shrank away from him. "No, no!" she cried. "I am not in love with anyone."

"I know better," said Hugo. "I have seen it a long time: seen it in a thousand ways. You made no secret of it, you know. You threw yourself in his way: you did all that you could to attract him; but you failed. He had to tell you to be more careful, had he not?"

"How dare you! How dare you!" cried the girl, starting up with her face aflame. "Never, never!" Then she threw herself down on the sofa and hid her face. Some memory came over her that made her writhe with shame. Hugo smiled to himself.

"Everybody saw what was going on," he continued. "Everybody pitied you. People wondered at your friends for allowing you to manifest an unrequited attachment in that shameless manner. They supposed that you knew no better; but they wondered that Mrs. Heron and Elizabeth Murray did not caution you. Perhaps they did. You were never very good at taking a caution, were you, Kitty?"

The only answer was a moan. He had found the way to torture her now; and he meant to use his power.

"Vivian was a good deal chaffed about it. He used to be a great flirt when he was younger, but not so much of late years, you know. I'll confess now, Kitty, I taxed him one day with his conduct to you. He said he was sorry; he knew that you were head and ears in love with him——"

"It is false," said Kitty, lifting a very pale face from the cushions amongst which she had laid it. "Mr. Vivian never said

anything of the kind. He is too much of a gentleman to say a thing like that."

"What do you know of the things that men say to each other when they are alone?" said Hugo, confident in her ignorance of the world, and professedly contemptuous. "He said what I have told you. And he said, too, that marriage was out of the question for him, on account of an unfortunate entanglement in his youth—a private marriage, or something of the kind; his wife is separated from him, but she is living still. He asked me to let you know this as soon and as gently as I could."

"Is it true?" she asked, in a low voice. Her face seemed to have grown ten years older in the last ten minutes: it was perfectly colourless, and the eyes had a dull, strained look, which was not softened even by the bright drops that still hung on her long lashes.

"Perfectly true," said Hugo. "Perhaps this paper will bring you conviction, if my word does not."

He handed her a small slip cut from a newspaper, which had the air of having been in his possession for some time. Kitty took it and read:—

"On the 15th of October, at St. Botolph's Church, Manchester, Rupert, eldest son of the late Gerald Vivian, Esq., of Vivian Court, Devonshire, to Selina Mary Smithson. No cards."

Just a commonplace announcement of marriage like any other. Kitty's eyes travelled to the top of the paper where the date was printed: 1863. "It is a long while ago," she said, pointing to the figures. "His wife may be dead." Her voice sounded hoarse and unnatural, even in her own ears.

"Perhaps so," said Hugo, carelessly. "If he said that she were, I should not be much inclined to believe him. After all these years of secrecy a man will say anything. But he told me last year that she was living."

Kitty laid down the paper with a sort of gasp and shiver. She murmured something to herself—it sounded like a prayer—"God help me!" or words to that effect—but she was quite unconscious of having spoken. Hugo took up the paper, and replaced it carefully in his pocket-book. He had held it in reserve for some time now; but he was not quite sure that it had done all its work.

"And now," he went on, "you see a part—not the whole—of my motives, Kitty. I had been raging in my heart against this fellow's insolence for long enough; I wanted to stop the slanderous tongues of the people who were talking about you; and I hoped—when you were so kind and gracious to me—that you meant to be my wife. Therefore, when I asked you

and you refused me, I grew desperate. Believe me, Kitty, or not, as you choose, but my love for you has nearly maddened me. I could not leave you to lay yourself open to the world's contempt and scorn: I was afraid—afraid—lest Vivian should do you harm in the world's eyes, and so I tried to save you, dear, to save you from yourself and him—even against your own will, when I brought you here."

His eyes grew moist, and lost some of their wildness: he drew nearer, and ventured almost timidly to take her hand. She did not repulse him, and from her silence and motionlessness he gathered courage.

"I thought to myself," he said, "that here, at least, was a refuge: here was a man who loved you, and was ready to give you his home and his name, and show the world that he loved you in spite of all. Here was a chance for you, I thought, to show that you had not given your heart where it was not wanted; that you were not that pitiable object, a woman scorned. But you refused me. So then I took the law into my own hands. Was I so very wrong?"

He paused, and she suddenly burst out into wild hysterical sobs and tears.

"Let me go home," she said, between her sobs. "I will give you my answer then. . . I will not forget! I will not be thoughtless and foolish any more. . . . But let me go home first: I must go home. I cannot stay here alone!"

"You cannot go home, Kitty," said Hugo, modulating his voice to one of extreme softness and sweetness. He knelt before her, and took both her hands in his. "You left Mrs. Baxter's yesterday afternoon—to meet me, you said. Where have you been since then?—that will be the first question. You cannot go home without me now: what would the world say? Don't you understand?"

"What does it matter what the world says? My father would know that it was all right," said Kitty, helplessly.

"Would your father take you in?" Hugo whispered. "Would he not rather say that you must have planned it all, that you were not to be trusted, that you had better have married me when I asked you? For, if you leave this house before you are my wife, Kitty, I shall not ask you again to marry me. Are you so simple as not to know why? You would be compromised: that is all. You need not have obliged me to tell you so."

She wrenched her hands away from him and put them before her eyes.

"Oh, I see it all now," she moaned. "I am trapped—trapped.

But I will not marry you. I will die rather. Oh, Rupert, Rupert! why do you not come?"

And then she fell into a fit of hysterical shrieking, succeeded by a swoon, from which Hugo found some difficulty in recovering her. He was obliged to call the nurse to his aid, and the nurse and the kitchen-maid between them carried the girl upstairs and placed her on the bed. Here Kitty came to herself by degrees, but it was thought well to leave the kitchen-maid, Elsie, beside her for some time, for as soon as she was left alone the hysterical symptoms reappeared. She saw Hugo no more that day, but on the following morning, when she sat pale and listless over the fire in her sitting-room, he reappeared. He spoke to her gently, but she gave him no answer. She looked at him with blank, languid eyes, and said not a word. He was almost frightened at her passivity. He thought that he had perhaps over-strained matters: that he had sent her out of her mind. But he did not lose hope. Kitty, with weakened powers of body and mind, would still be to him the woman that he loved, and that he had set his heart upon winning for his wife.

That day passed, and the next, with no change in her condition. Hugo began to grow impatient. He resolved to try stronger measures.

But stronger measures were not necessary. On the fifth day, he came to her at eleven o'clock in the morning, with a curious smile upon his lips. He had an opera-glass in his hand.

"I have something to show you, Kitty," he said to her.

He led her to the window, and directed her attention to a distant point in the view where a few yards of the highroad could be discerned. "You see the road," he said. "Now look through the glass for a few minutes."

Languidly enough she did as he desired. The strong glass brought into her sight in a few moments two gentlemen on horseback. Kitty uttered a faint cry. It was her father and Mr. Colquhoun.

"I thought that we should see them in a minute or two," said Hugo, calmly. "They were here a quarter-of-an-hour ago."

"Here! In this house?"

"Yes; making inquiries after you. I think I quite convinced them that I knew nothing about you. They apologised for the trouble they had given me, and went away."

"Oh, father, father!" cried Kitty, stretching out her arms and sobbing wildly, as if she could make him hear: "Oh, father, come back! come back! Am I to die here and never see you again—never again?"

Hugo said nothing more. He had no need. She wept herself

into quietness, and then remained silent for a long time, with her head buried in her hands. He left her in this position, and did not return until the evening. And then she spoke to him in a voice which showed that her strength had deserted her, her will had been bent at last.

"Do as you please," she said. "I will be your wife. I see no other way. But I hate you—I hate you—and I will never forgive you for what you have done as long as ever I live."

CHAPTER XLV.

TOO LATE!

RUPERT VIVIAN went to London with a fixed determination not to return to Strathleckie. He told himself that he had been thinking far too much of the whims and vagaries of a silly, pretty girl; and that it would be for his good to put such memories of her bright eyes, and vain, coquettish ways as remained to him, completely out of his mind. He did his best to carry out this resolution, but he was not very successful.

He had some troubles of his own, and a good deal of business to transact; but the weeks did not pass very rapidly, although his time was so fully occupied. He began to be anxious to hear something of his friend, Percival Heron; he searched the newspapers for tidings of the *Arizona*, he called at Lloyd's to inquire after her; but a mystery seemed to hang over her fate. She had never reached Pernambuco—so much was certain! Had she gone to the bottom, carrying with her passengers and crew? And the *Falcon*, in which Brian had sailed—also reported missing—what had become of her?

Rupert knew enough of Elizabeth Murray's story to think of her with anxiety—almost with tenderness—at this juncture. He knew of no reason why the marriage with Percival should not take place, for he had not heard a word about her special interest in Brian Luttrell; but he had been told of Brian's reappearance, and of the doubt cast upon his claim to the property. He was anxious, for Percival's sake as well as for hers, that the matter should be satisfactorily adjusted; and he felt a pang of dismay when he first learnt the doubt that hung over the fate of the *Arizona*.

His anxiety led him one day to stroll with a friend into the office of a shipowner who had some connection with the *Arizona*. Here he found an old sailor telling a story to which the clerks and the chief himself were listening with evident interest. Vivian inquired who he was. The answer made him start. John Mason, of the good ship *Arizona*, which I saw with my own

eyes go down in eight fathoms o' water off Rocas reef. Me and the mate got off in the boat, by a miracle, as you may say. All lost but us."

And forthwith he told the story of the wreck—as far as he knew it.

Vivian listened with painful eagerness, and sat for some little time in silence when the story was finished, with his hand shading his eyes. Then he rose up and addressed the man.

"I want you to go with me to Scotland," he said, abruptly. "I want you to tell this story to a lady. She was to have been married to the Mr. Heron of whom you speak as soon as he returned. Poor girl! if anything can make it easier for her, it will be to hear of poor Heron's courage in the hour of death."

He set out that night, taking John Mason with him, and gleaning from him many details concerning Percival's popularity on board ship, details which he knew would be precious to the ears of his family by-and-bye. Mason was an honest fellow, and did not exaggerate, even when he saw that exaggeration would be welcome: but Percival had made himself remarked, as he generally did wherever he went, by his ready tongue and flow of animal spirits. Mason had many stories to tell of Mr. Heron's exploits, and he told them well.

Vivian was anxious to see the Herons before any newspaper report should reach them; and he therefore hurried the seaman up to Strathleckie after a hasty breakfast at the hotel. But at Strathleckie, disappointment awaited him. Everybody was out—except the baby and the servants. The whole party had gone to spend a long day at the house of a friend: they would not be back till evening.

Rupert was forced to resign himself to the delay. The man, Mason, was regaled in the servants' hall, and was there regarded as a kind of hero; but Vivian had no such distraction of mind. He had nothing to do: he had reasons of his own for neither walking out nor trying to read. He leaned back in an arm-chair, with his back to the light, and closed his eyes. From time to time he sighed heavily.

He felt himself quite sufficiently at home to ask for anything that he wanted; and the glass of wine and biscuit which formed his luncheon were brought to him in the study, the room that seemed to him best fitted for the communication that he would have to make. He had been there for two or three hours, and the short winter day was already beginning to grow dim, when the door opened, and a footstep made itself heard upon the threshold.

It was a woman's step. It paused, advanced, then paused

again as if in doubt. Vivian rose from his chair, and held out both hands. "Kitty," he said. "Kitty, is it you?"

"Yes, it is I," she said. Her voice had lost its ring; there was a tonelessness about it which convinced Rupert that she had already heard what he had come to tell.

"I thought you had gone with the others," he said, "but I am glad to find you here. I can tell you first—alone. I have sad news, Kitty. Why don't you come and shake hands with me, dear, as you always do? I want to have your little hand in mine while I tell you the story."

He was standing near the arm-chair, from which he had risen, with his hand extended still. There was a look of appeal, almost a look of helplessness, about him, which Kitty did not altogether understand. She came forward and touched his hand very lightly, and then would have withdrawn it had his fingers not closed upon it with a firm, yet gentle grasp.

"I think I know what you have come to say," she answered, not struggling to draw her hand away, but surrendering it as if it were not worth while to consider such a trifle. "I read it all in the newspapers this morning. The others do not know."

"You did not tell them?" said Rupert, a little surprised.

"I came to tell them now."

"You have been away? Ah, yes, I heard you talking about a visit to Edinburgh some time ago: you have been there, perhaps? I came to see your father—to see you all, so that you should not learn the story first from the newspapers, but I was too late to shield you, Kitty."

"Yes," she said, with a weary sigh; "too late."

"I have brought the man Mason with me. He will tell you a great deal more than you can read in the newspapers. Would you like to see him now? Or will you wait until your father comes?"

"I will wait, I think," said Kitty, very gently. "They will not be long now. Sit down, Mr. Vivian. I hope you have had all that you want."

"What is the matter, Kitty?" asked Vivian, with (for him) extraordinary abruptness. "Why have you taken away your hand, child? What have I done?"

She made no answer.

"You are in trouble, Kitty. Can I not comfort you a little? I would give a great deal to be able to do it. But the day for that is gone by."

"Yes, it is gone by," echoed Kitty once more in the tones that never used to be so sad.

"It is selfish to talk about myself when you have this great

loss to bear," he pursued; "and yet I must tell you what has happened to me lately, so that you may understand what perhaps seems strange to you. Am I altered, Kitty? Do I look changed to your eyes in any way?"

"No," she answered, hesitatingly; "I think not. But people do not change very easily in appearance, do they? Whatever happens, they are the same. I am not at all altered, they tell me, since—since you were here."

"Why should you be?" said Rupert, vaguely touched, he knew not why, by the pathetic quality that had crept into her voice. "Even a great sorrow, like this one, does not change us in a single day. But I have had some weeks in which to think of my loss; small and personal though it may seem to you."

"What loss?" said Kitty.

"Is it no loss to think that I shall never see your face again, Kitty? I am blind."

"Blind!" She said the word again, with a strange thrill in her voice. "Blind!"

"Not quite, just yet," said Rupert, quietly, but with a resolute cheerfulness. "I know that you are standing there, and I can still grope my way amongst the tables and chairs in a room, without making many mistakes: but I cannot see your sweet eyes and mouth, Kitty, and I shall never look upon the purple hills again. Do you remember that we planned to climb Craig Vohr next summer for the sake of the fine view? Not much use my attempting it now, I am afraid—unless you went with me, and told me what you saw."

She did not say a word. He waited a moment, but none came; and he could not see the tears that were in her eyes. Perhaps he divined that they were there.

"It has been coming on for some time," he said, still in the cheerful tone which he had made himself adopt. "I was nearly certain of it when I was here in January; and since then I have seen some famous oculists, and spent a good deal of time in a dark room — with no very good result. Nothing can be done."

"Nothing? Absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing at all. I must bear it as other men have done. I am rather old to frame my life anew, and I shall never equal Mr. Fawcett in energy and power, though I think I shall take him as my model," said Rupert, with a rather sad smile, "but I must do my best, and I dare say I shall get used to it in time. Kitty, I thought—somehow—that I should like to hear you say that you were sorry. . . And you have not said it yet."

"I am sorry," said Kitty, in a low voice.

The tears were falling over her pale cheeks, but she did not turn away her head—why should she? He could not see.

"I have been a fool," said Vivian, with the unusual energy of utterance which struck her as something new in him. "I am thirty-eight—twenty years older than you, Kitty—and I have missed half the happiness that I might have got out of my life, and squandered the other half. I will tell you what happened when I was a lad of one-and-twenty—before you were a year old, Kitty: think of that!—I fell in love with a woman some years older than myself. She was a barmaid. Can you fancy me now in love with a barmaid? I find it hard to imagine, myself. I married her, Kitty. Before we had been married six weeks I discovered that she drank. I was tied to a drunken, brawling, foul-mouthed woman of the lower class—for life. At least I thought it was for life."

He paused, and asked with peculiar gentleness:—

"Am I telling you this at a wrong time? Shall I leave my story for another day? You are thinking of him, perhaps: I am not without thoughts of him, too, even in the story that I tell. Shall I stop, or shall I go on?"

"Go on, please. I want to hear. Yes, as well now as any other time. You married. What then?"

Could it be Kitty who was speaking? Rupert scarcely recognised those broken, uneven tones. He went on slowly.

"She left me at last. We agreed to separate. I saw her from time to time, and made her an allowance. She lived in one place: I in another. She died last year."

"Last year?"

"Yes, in the autumn. You heard that I had gone into Wales to see a relation who was dying: that was my wife."

"Did Percival know?" asked Kitty, in a low voice.

"No. I think very few persons knew. I wonder whether I ought to have told the world in general! I did not want to blazon forth my shame."

For a little time they both were silent. Then Rupert said, softly:—

"When she was dead, I remembered the little girl whom I used to know in Gower-street; and I said to myself that I would find her out."

"You found her changed," said Kitty, with a sob.

"Very much changed outwardly; but with the same loving heart at the core. Kitty, I was unjust to you: I have come back to offer reparation."

"For what?"

"For that injustice, dear. When I went away from Strath

leckie in January, I was angry and vexed with you. I thought that you were throwing yourself away in promising to marry Hugo Luttrell—" then, as Kitty made a sudden gesture—"oh, I know I had no right to interfere. I was wrong, quite wrong. I must confess to you now, Kitty, that I thought you a vain, frivolous, little creature; and it was not until I began to think over what I had said to you and what you had said to me, that I saw clearly, as I lay in my darkened room, how unjust I had been to you."

"You were not unjust," said Kitty, hurriedly; "and I was wrong. I did not tell you the truth; I let you suppose that I was engaged to Hugo when I was not. But——"

"You were not engaged to him?"

"No."

"Then I may say what I should have said weeks ago if I had not thought that you had promised to marry him?"

"It cannot make much difference what you say now," said Kitty, heavily. "It is too late."

"I suppose it is. I cannot ask any woman—especially any girl of your age—to share the burden of my infirmity."

"It is not that. Anyone would be proud to share such a burden—to be of the least help to you—but I mean—you have not heard——"

She could not go on. If he had seen her face he might have guessed more quickly what she meant. But he could not see; and her voice, broken as it was, told him only that she was agitated by some strong emotion—he knew not of what kind. He rose and stood beside her, as if he did not like to sit while she was standing. Even at that moment she was struck by the absence of his old airs of superiority; his blindness seemed to have given him back the dependence and simplicity of much earlier days.

"I suppose you mean that you are not free," he said. "And even if you had been free, my dear, it is not at all likely that I should have had a chance. There are certain to be many wooers of a girl possessed of your fresh sweetness and innocent gaiety. I wished only to say to you that I have been punished for any harsh words of mine, by finding out that I could not forget your face for a day, for an hour. I will not say that I cannot live without you; but I will say that life would have the charm that it had in the days of my youth, if I could have hoped that you, Kitty, would have been my wife."

There was a faint melancholy in the last few words that went to Kitty's heart. Rupert heard her sob, and immediately put out his hand with the uncertain action of a man who cannot see.

"Kitty!" he said, ruefully, "I did not mean to make you cry, dear. Don't grieve. There are obstacles on both sides now. I am a blind, helpless old fellow; and you are going to be married. Child, what does this mean?"

Unable to speak, she had seized his hand and guided it to the finger on which she wore a plain gold ring. He felt it: he felt her hand, and then he asked a question.

"Are you married already, Kitty?"

"Yes."

"To whom?"

"To Hugo Luttrell." And then she sank down almost at his feet, sobbing, and her hot tears fell upon the hand which she pressed impulsively to her lips. "Oh, forgive me! forgive me!" she cried. "Indeed, I did not know what to do. I was very wicked and foolish. And now I am miserable. I shall be miserable all my life."

These vague self-accusations conveyed no very clear idea to Vivian's mind; but he was conscious of a sharp sting of pain at the thought that she was not happy in her marriage.

"I did not know. I would not have spoken as I did if I had known," he said.

"No, I know you would not; and yet I could not tell you. You will hear all about it from the others. I cannot bear to tell you. And yet—yet—don't think me quite so foolish, quite so wrong as they will say that I have been. They do not know all. I cannot tell them all. I was driven into it—and now I have to bear the punishment. My whole life is a punishment. I am miserable."

"Life can never be a mere punishment, if it is rightly led," said Vivian, in a low tone. "It is, at any rate, full of duties and they will bring happiness."

"To some, perhaps; not to me," said Kitty, raising herself from her kneeling posture and drying her eyes. "I have no duties but to look nice and make myself agreeable."

"You will find duties if you look for them. There is your husband's happiness, to begin with——"

"My husband," exclaimed Kitty, in a tone of passionate contempt that startled him. But they could say no more, for at that moment the carriage came up to the door, and, from the voices in the hall, it was plain that the family had returned.

A great hush fell upon those merry voices when Mr. Vivian's errand was made known. Mrs. Heron, who was really fond of Percival, was inconsolable, and retired to her own room with the little boys and the baby to weep for him in peace. Mr. Heron, Kitty, and Elizabeth remained with Rupert in the study, listening to the short account which he gave of the wreck of the *Arizona*,

as he had learnt it from Mason's lips. And then it was proposed that Mason should be summoned to tell his own story.

Mason's eyes rested at once upon Elizabeth with a look of respectful admiration. He told his story with a rough, plain eloquence which more than once brought tears to the listeners' eyes; and he dwelt at some length on the presence of mind and cheery courage which Mr. Heron had shown during the few minutes between the striking of the ship and her going down. "Just as bold as a lion, ladies and gentlemen; helping every poor soul along, and never thinking of himself. They told fine tales of one of the men we took aboard from the *Falcon*; but Mr. Heron beat him and all of us, I'm sure."

"You took on board someone from the *Falcon*?" said Elizabeth, suddenly.

"Yes, ma'am, three men that were picked up in an open boat, where they had been for five days and nights; the *Falcon* having been burnt to the water's edge, and very few of the crew saved."

Elizabeth's hands clasped themselves a little more tightly, but she suffered no sign of emotion to escape her.

"Do you remember the names of the men saved from the *Falcon*?" she said.

"There was Jackson," said the sailor, slowly; "and there was Fall; and there was a steerage passenger—seems to me his name was Smith, but I can't rec'llect exackly."

"It was not Stretton?"

"No, it warn't no name like that, ma'am."

"Then they are both lost," said Elizabeth, rising up with a deadly calm in her fixed eyes and white face; "both lost in the great, wild sea. We shall see them no more—no more." She paused, and then added in a much lower voice, as if speaking to herself: "I shall go to them, but they will not return to me."

Her strength seemed to give way. She walked a few steps unsteadily, threw up her hands as if to save herself, and without a word and without a cry, fell in a dead faint to the ground.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A MERE CHANCE.

VIVIAN went back to London on the following morning, taking Mason with him. He had heard what made him anxious to leave Strathleckie before any accidental meeting with Hugo Luttrell should take place. The story told of Kitty's marriage was that she had eloped with Hugo; and Mr. Heron, in talking the matter over with his son's friend, declared that an elopement had been not only disgraceful, but utterly unnecessary,

since he should never have thought of opposing the marriage. He had been exceedingly angry at first; and now, although he received Kitty at Strathleckie, he treated her with great coldness, and absolutely refused to speak to Hugo at all.

In a man of Mr. Heron's easy temperament, these manifestations of anger were very strong; and Vivian felt even a little surprised that he took the matter so much to heart. He himself was not convinced that the whole truth of the story had been told: he was certain, at any rate, that Hugo Luttrell had dragged Kitty's name through the mire in a most unjustifiable way, and he felt a strong desire to wreak vengeance upon him. For Kitty's sake, therefore, it was better that he should keep out of the way: he did not want to quarrel with her husband, and he knew that Hugo would not be sorry to find a cause of dispute with him.

He could not abandon the hope of some further news of the *Arizona* and the *Falcon*. He questioned Mason repeatedly concerning the shipwrecked men who had been taken on board; but he obtained little information. And yet he could not be content. It became a regular thing for Vivian to be seen, day after day, in the shipowners' offices, at Lloyd's, at the docks, asking eagerly for news, or, more frequently, turning his sightless eyes and anxious face from one desk to another, as the careless comments of the clerks upon his errand fell upon his ear. Sometimes his secretary came with him: sometimes, but more seldom, a lady. For Angela was living with him now, and she was as anxious about Brian as he was concerning Percival.

He had been making these inquiries one day, and had turned away with his hand upon Angela's arm, when a burly, red-faced man, with a short, brown beard, whom Angela had seen once or twice before in the office, followed, and addressed himself to Rupert.

"Beg pardon: should like to speak to you for a moment, sir, if agreeable to the lady," he said, touching his cap. "You were asking about the *Arizona*, wrecked off the Rocas Reef, were you not?"

"Yes, I was," said Vivian, quickly. "Have you any news? Have any survivors of the crew returned?"

"Can't say I know of any, save John Mason and Terry, the mate," said the man, shaking his head. He had a bluff, good-natured manner, which Angela did not dislike; but it seemed somewhat to repel her brother.

"If you have no news," he began in a rather distant tone; but the man interrupted him with a genial laugh.

"I've got no news, sir, but I've got a suggestion, if you'll allow

me to make it. No concern of mine, of course, but I heard that you had friends aboard the *Arizona*, and I took an interest in that vessel because she came to grief at a place which has been the destruction of many a fine ship, and where I was once wrecked myself."

"You! And how did you escape?" said Angela, eagerly.

"Swam ashore, ma'am," said the man, touching his cap. Then, with a shy sort of smile, he added:—"What I did, others may have done, for certain."

"You swam to the reef?" asked Vivian.

"First to the reef and then to the island, sir. There's two islands inside the reef forming the breakwater. More than once the same thing has happened. Men had been there before me, and had been fetched away by passing ships, and men may be there now for aught we know."

"Oh, Rupert!" said Angela, softly.

"How long were you on the island then?" asked Rupert.

"About three weeks, sir. But I have heard of the crew of a ship being there for as many months—and more. You have to take your chance. I was lucky. I'm always pretty lucky, for the matter of that."

"Would it be easy to land on the island?"

"There's an opening big enough for boats in the reef. It ain't a very easy matter to swim the distance. I was only thinking, when I heard you asking questions, that it was just possible that some of the crew and passengers might have got ashore, after all, as I did, and turn up when you're least expecting it. It's a chance, anyway. Good morning, sir."

"Excuse me," said Vivian; "would you mind giving me your name and address?"

The man's name was Somers: he was the captain of a small trading vessel, and was likely to be in London for some weeks.

"But if you have anything more to ask me, sir," he said, "I shall be pleased to come and answer any of your inquiries at your own house, if you wish. It's a long tramp for you to come my way."

"Thank you," said Vivian. "If it is not troubling you too much, I think I had better come to you. Your time is valuable, no doubt, and mine is not."

"You'll find me in between three and five almost any time," said Captain Somers, and with these words they parted.

Rupert fell into a brown study as soon as the captain had left them, and Angela did not interrupt the current of his thoughts. Presently he said:—

"What sort of face had that man, Angela?"

"A very honest face, I think," she said.

"He seemed honest. But one can tell so much from a man's face that does not come out in his manner. This is the sort of interview that makes me feel what a useless log I am."

"You must not think that, Rupert."

"But I do think it. I wish I could find something to do—something that would take me out of myself and these purely personal troubles of mine. At my age a man certainly ought to have a career. But what am I talking about? No career is open to me now." And then he sighed; and she knew without being told that he was thinking of his dead wife and of Kitty Heron, as well as of his blindness.

Little by little he had told her the whole story; or rather she had pieced it together from fragments—stray words and sentences that he let fall; for Rupert was never very ready to make confidences. But at present he was glad of her quiet sympathy; and during the past few weeks she had learnt more about her brother than he had ever allowed her to learn before. But she never alluded to what he called his "purely personal troubles" unless he first made a remark about them of his own accord; and he very seldom indulged himself by referring to them.

He had not informed the Herons of a fact that was of some importance to him at this time. He had never been without fair means of his own; but it had recently happened that a distant relative died and left him a large fortune. He talked at first to Angela about purchasing the old house in Devonshire, which had been sold in the later years of his father's life; but during the last few weeks he had not mentioned this project, and she almost thought that he had given it up.

One result of this accession of wealth was that he took a pleasant house in Kensington, where he and his sister spent their days together. He had a young man to act as his secretary and as a companion in expeditions which would have been beyond Angela's strength; and on his return from the docks, where he met Captain Somers, he seemed to have a good deal to say to this young fellow. He sent him out on an errand which took up a good deal of time. Angela guessed that he was making inquiries about Captain Somers. And she was right.

Vivian went next day to the address which the sea-captain had given him; and he took with him his secretary, Mr. Fane. They found Captain Somers at home, in a neat little room for which he looked too big; a room furnished like the cabin of a ship, and decorated with the various things usually seen in a seaman's dwelling—some emu's eggs, a lump of brain coral, baskets of tamarind seeds, and bunches of blackened sea-weed. There were

maps and charts on the table, and to one of these Captain Somers directed his guest's attention.

"There, sir," he said. "There's the Rocas Reef; off Pernambuco, as you see. That's the point where the *Arizona* struck, I'm pretty sure of that."

"Show it to my friend, Mr. Fane," said Vivian, gently pushing the chart away from him. "I can't see. I'm blind."

"Lord!" ejaculated the captain. Then, after an instant of astonished silence, "One would never have guessed it. I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir."

"What for?" said Vivian, smiling. "I am glad to hear that I don't look like a blind man. And now tell me about your shipwreck on the Rocas Reef."

Captain Somers launched at once into his story. He gave a very graphic description of the island, and of the days that he had spent upon it; and he wound up by saying that he had known of two parties of shipwrecked mariners who had made their way to the place, and that, in his opinion, there was no reason why there should not be a third.

"But, mind you, sir," he said, "it's only a strong man and a good swimmer that would have any chance. There wasn't one of us that escaped but could swim like a fish. Was your friend a good swimmer, do you happen to know?"

"Remarkably good."

"Ah, then, he had a chance; you know, after all, the chance is very small."

"But you think," said Vivian, deliberately, "that possibly there are now men on that island, waiting for a ship to come and take them off?"

"Well, sir," said the captain, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his pea-jacket, and settling himself deep into his wooden arm-chair, "it's just a possibility."

"Do ships ever call at the island?"

"They give it as wide a berth as they can, sir. Still, if it was a fine, clear day, and a vessel passed within reasonable distance, the castaways, if there were any, might make a signal. The smoke from a fire can be seen a good way off. Unfortunately, the reef lies low. That's what makes it dangerous."

Vivian sat brooding over this information for some minutes. The captain watched him curiously, and said:—

"It's only fair to remind you, sir, that even if some of the men did get safe to the island, there's no certainty that your friend would be amongst them. In fact, it's ten to one that any of them got to land; and it's a hundred to one that your friend is there. It would need a good deal of pluck, and strength, and skill, too, to

save himself in that way, or else a deal of luck. I had the luck," said Captain Somers, modestly, "but I own it's unusual."

"I don't know about the luck," said Vivian, "but if pluck, and strength, and skill could save a man under those circumstances, I think my friend Heron had a good chance."

They had some more conversation, and then Vivian took his leave. He did not talk much when he reached the street, and throughout the rest of the day he was decidedly absent-minded and thoughtful. Angela forebore to question him, but she saw that something lay upon his mind, and she became anxious to hear what it was. Mr. Fane preserved a discreet silence. It was not until after dinner that Rupert seemed to awake to a consciousness of his unwonted silence and abstraction.

The servants had withdrawn. A shaded lamp threw a circle of brilliance upon the table, and brought out its distinctive features with singular distinctness against a background of olive-green wall and velvet curtain. Its covering of glossy white damask, its ornaments of Venetian glass, the delicate yet vivid colours of the hothouse flowers and fruit in the dishes, the gem-like tints of the wines, the very texture and the hues of the Bulgarian embroidery upon the d'oyleys, formed a study in colour which an artist would have loved to paint. The faces and figures of the persons present harmonised well enough with the artistic surroundings. Angela's pale, spiritual loveliness was not impaired by the sombreness of her garments; she almost always wore black now, but it was black velvet, and she had a knot of violets in her bosom. Rupert's musing face, with its high-bred look of distinction, was turned thoughtfully to the fire. Arthur Fane had the sleek, fair head, straight features, and good-humouredly intelligent expression, characteristic of a very pleasant type of young Englishman. The beautiful deerhound which sat with its long nose on Rupert's knee, and its melancholy eyes lifted affectionately from time to time to Rupert's face, was a not unworthy addition to the group.

Vivian spoke at last with a smile. "I am very unsociable to-night," he said, turning his face to the place where he knew Angela sat. "I have been making a decision."

Fane looked up sharply; Angela said "Yes?" in an inquiring tone.

But Rupert did not at once mention the nature of his decision. He began to repeat Captain Somer's story; he told her what kind of a place the Rocas Reef was like; he even begged Fane to fetch an atlas from the study and show her the spot where the *Arizona* had been wrecked.

"You must please not mention this matter to the Herons when you are writing, you know, Angela," he continued, "or to Miss

Murray. It is a mere chance—the smallest chance in the world—and it would not be fair to excite their hopes."

"But it is a chance, is it not, Rupert?"

"Yes, dear, it is a chance."

"Then can nothing be done?"

"I think something must be done," said he, quietly. There was a purpose in his tone, a hopeful light in his face, which she could not but remark.

"What will you do, Rupert?"

"I think, dear," he said, smiling, "that the easiest plan would be for me to go out to the Rocas Reef myself."

"You, Rupert!"

"Yes, I, myself. That is if Fane will go with me."

"I shall be delighted," said Fane, whose grey eyes danced with pleasure at the idea.

"You must take me, too," said Angela.

It was Rupert's turn now to ejaculate. "You, Angela! My dear child, you are joking."

"I'm not joking at all. You would be much more comfortable if I went, too. And I think that Aunt Alice would go with us, if we asked her. Why not? You want to travel, and I have nothing to keep me in England. Let us go together."

Rupert smiled. "I want to lose no time," he said. "I must travel fast."

"I am fond of travelling. And I shall be so lonely while you are away."

That argument was a strong one. Rupert conceded the point. Angela should go with him on condition that Aunt Alice—usually known as Mrs. Norman—should go too. They would travel with all reasonable swiftness, and if—as was to be feared—their expedition should prove unsuccessful, they could loiter a little as they came back, and make themselves acquainted with various pleasant and interesting places on their way. They spent the rest of the evening in discussing their route.

Rupert was rich enough to carry out his whim—if whim it could be called—in the pleasantest and speediest way. Before long he was the temporary owner of a fine little schooner, in which he proposed to scour the seas in search of his missing friend. To his great satisfaction, Captain Somers consented to act as his skipper: a crew of picked men was obtained; and the world in general received the information that Mr. Vivian and his sister were going on a yachting expedition for the good of their health, and would probably not return to England for many months.

Rupert's spirits rose perceptibly at the prospect of the voyage.

He was tired of inaction, and welcomed the opportunity of a complete change. He had not much hope of finding Percival, but he was resolved, at any rate, to explore the Rocas Reef, and discover any existing traces of the *Arizona*. "And who knows but what there may be some other poor fellows on that desolate reef?" he said to his secretary, Fane, who was wild with impatience to set off. "We can but go and see. If we are unsuccessful we will go round Cape Horn and up to Fiji. I always had a hankering after those lovely Pacific islands. If you are going down Pall Mall, Fane, you might step into Harrison's and order those books by Miss Bird and Miss Gordon Cumming—you know the ones I mean. They will make capital reading on board."

Angela had been making some purchases in Kensington one afternoon, and was thinking that it was time to return home, when she came unexpectedly face to face with an acquaintance. It was Elizabeth Murray.

Angela knew her slightly, but had always liked her. A great wave of sympathy rose in her heart as her eyes rested upon the face of a woman who had, perhaps, lost her lover, even as Angela had lost hers. Elizabeth's face had parted with its beautiful bloom; it was pale and worn, and the eyelids looked red and heavy, as though from sleepless nights and many tears. The two clasped hands warmly. Angela's lips quivered, and her eyes filled with tears, but Elizabeth's face was rigidly set in an enforced quietude.

"I am glad I have met you," she said. "I was wondering where to find you. I did not know your address."

"Come and see me now," said Angela, by a sudden impulse.

"Thank you. I will."

A few minutes' walking brought them to the old house which Rupert had lately taken. It was in a state of some confusion: boxes stood in the passages, parcels were lying about the floor. Angela coloured a little as she saw Elizabeth's eye fall on some of these.

"We are going away," she said, hurriedly, "on a sea-voyage. The doctors have been recommending it to Rupert for some time."

This was strictly true.

"I knew you were going away," said Elizabeth, in a low tone.

She was standing beside a table in the drawing-room: her left hand rested upon it, her eyes were fixed absently upon the muff which she carried in her right hand. Angela asked her to sit down. But Elizabeth did not seem to hear. She began to speak with a nervous tremor in her voice which made Angela feel nervous, too.

"I have heard a strange thing," she said. "I have heard it rumoured that you are going to cross the Atlantic—that you mean to visit the Rocas Reef. Tell me, please, if it is true or not."

Angela did not know what to say.

"We are going to South America," she murmured, with a somewhat embarrassed smile. "We may pass the Rocas Reef."

"Ah, speak to me frankly," said Elizabeth, putting down her muff and moving forward with a slight gesture of supplication. "Mr. Vivian was Percival's friend. Does he really mean to go and look for him? Do they think that some of the crew and passengers may be living upon the island still?"

"There is just a chance," said Angela, quoting her brother. "He means to go and see. We did not tell you: we were afraid you might be too—too—hopeful."

"I will not be too hopeful. I will be prudent and calm. But you must tell me all about it. Do you really think there is any chance? Oh, you are happy: you can go and see for yourself, and I can do nothing—nothing—nothing! And it was my doing that he went!"

Her voice sank into a low moan. She clasped her hands together and wrung them a little beneath her cloak. Angela, looking at her with wet, sympathetic eyes, had a sudden inspiration. She held out her hand.

"Come with us," she said, gently. "Why should you not? We will take care of you. What would I not have given to do something for the man I loved! If Mr. Heron is living, you shall help us to find him."

Elizabeth's face turned white. "I cannot go with you under false pretences," she said. "You will think me base—wicked; you cannot think too ill of me—but—— It was not Percival Heron whom I loved. And he knew it—and loved me still. You—you—have been true in your heart to your promised husband; but I—in my heart—was false."

She covered her face and burst into passionate weeping as she spoke. But Angela did not hesitate.

"If that is the case," she said, very softly and sweetly, "if you are anxious to repair any wrong that you have done to him, help us to find him now. You have nothing to keep you in England? My brother will say what I say—Come with us."

CHAPTER XLVII.

FOUND.

"As far as I can calculate," said Percival, "this is the end of March. Confound it! I wish I had some tobacco

"Don't begin to wish," remarked Brian, lazily, "or you will never end."

"I haven't your philosophy. I am wishing all day long—and for nothing so much as the sight of a sail on yonder horizon."

In justice to Percival, it must be observed that he never spoke in this way except when alone with Brian, and very seldom even then. There had been a marked change in their relations to each other since the night when Heron had made what he called "his confession." They had never again mentioned the subject then discussed, but there had been a steady growth of friendship and confidence between them. If it was ever interrupted, it was only when Percival had now and then a moody fit, during which he would keep a sort of sullen silence. Brian respected these moods, and thought that he understood them. But he found in the end that he had been as much mistaken about their origin as Percival had once been mistaken in attributing motives of a mercenary kind to him. And when the cloud passed, Percival would be friendlier and more genial than ever.

"Of course," said Heron, presently, "if a vessel saw our signal and hove to, we should have to send out one of our ingeniously constructed small boats and state our case. Jackson and I would be the best men for the purpose, I suppose. Then they would send for the rest of you. A good opportunity for leaving you behind, Brian, eh?"

"A hermit's life would not suit me badly," said Brian, who was lying on his back on a patch of sand in the shade, with a hat of cocoa-nut fibre tilted over his eyes. "I think I could easily let you go back without me."

"I shall not do that, you know."

"It is foolish, perhaps, to let our minds dwell on the future," said Brian, after a moment's pause; "but the more I think of it the more I wonder that your mind is so set upon dragging me back to England. You know that I don't want to go. You know that that business could be settled just as well without me as with me; better, in fact. I shall have to stultify myself; to repudiate my own actions; to write myself down an ass."

"Good for you," said Percival, with an ironical smile.

"Possibly; but I don't see what you gain by it."

"Love of dominion, my dear fellow. I want to drag you as a captive at my chariot-wheels, of course. We will have a military band at the Dunmuir Station, and it shall play 'See the conquering hero comes.'"

"Very well. I don't mind assisting at your triumph."

"Hum! My triumph? Wait till that day arrives, and we shall see. What's that fellow making frantic signs about from

that biggest palm-tree? It looks as if—— Good Heavens, Brian, it's a sail!"

He dashed the net that he had been making to the ground, and rushed off at the top of his speed to the place where a pile of wood and seaweed had been heaped to make a bonfire. Brian followed with almost equal swiftness. The others had already collected at the spot, and in a few minutes a thin, wavering line of smoke rose up into the air, and flashes of fire began to creep amongst the carefully-dried fuel.

For a time they all watched the sail in silence. Others had been seen before; others had faded away into the blue distance, and left their hearts sick and sore. Would this one vanish like the others? Was their column of smoke, now rising thick and black towards the cloudless sky, big enough to be seen by the man on the look-out? And, if it was seen—what then? Why, even then, they might choose to avoid that perilous reef, and pass it by.

"It's coming nearer," said Jackson, at last, in a loud whisper.

Brian looked at Percival, then turned away and fixed his eyes once more upon the distant sail. There was something in Percival's face which he hardly cared to see. The veins on his forehead were swollen, his lips were nearly bitten through, his eyes were strained with that passionate longing for deliverance to which he seldom gave vent in words. If this vessel brought no succour, Brian trembled to think of the force of the reaction from that intense desire. For himself, Brian had little care: he was astonished to find how slightly the suspense of waiting told upon him, except for others' sake. He had no prospects: no future. But Percival had everything in the world that heart could wish for: home, happiness, success. It was natural that his impatience should have something in it that was fierce and bitter. If this ship failed them, the disappointment would almost break his heart.

"They've seen us," Jackson repeated, hoarsely. "They're making for the island. Thank God!"

"Don't be too sure," said Percival, in a harsh voice. Then, in a few minutes, he added:—"The boats had better be seen to. I think you are right."

Fenwick and the boy went off immediately to the place where the two little boats were moored—boats which they had all laboured to manufacture out of driftwood and rusty iron nails. Jackson remained to throw fuel on the fire, and Percival, suddenly laying a hand on Brian's arm, led him apart and turned his back upon the glittering expanse of sea.

"I'm as bad as a woman," he said, tightening his grasp till it

seemed like one of steel on Brian's arm. "It turns me sick to look. Do you think it is coming or not?"

"Of course it is coming. Don't break down at the last moment, Heron."

"I'm not such a fool," said Percival, gruffly. "But—good God! think of the months we have gone through. I say," with a sudden and complete change of tone, "you're not going to back out of our arrangements, are you? You're coming to England with me?"

"If you wish it."

"I do wish it."

"Very well. I will come."

They clasped hands for a moment in silence and then separated. Brian went to the hut to collect the scanty belongings of the party: Percival made his way down to the boats.

There was no mistake about the vessel now. She was making steadily for the Rocas Reef. About a mile-and-a-half from it she hove to; and a boat was lowered. By this time Heron and Jackson had rowed to the one gap in the barrier reef that surrounded the island; they met the ship's boat half-way between the reef and the ship itself. A young, fair, pleasant-looking man in the ship's boat attracted Percival's attention at once: he seemed to be in some position of authority, although it was evident that he was not one of the ship's officers. As soon as they were within speaking distance of each other, questions and answers were exchanged. Percival was struck by the brightness of the young man's face as he gave the information required. After a little parley, the boat went its way to the schooner; the officer in charge declaring with an odd smile that the castaways had better make known their condition to the captain, before returning for the others on the island. Percival was in no mood to demur: he and Jackson stepped into the ship's boat, and their own tiny craft was towed behind it as a curiosity in boatbuilding.

There was a good deal of crowding at the ship's sides to look at the new-comers: and, as Percival sprang on board, with a sense of almost overpowering relief and joy at the sight of his countrymen, a broad, red-faced man with a black beard, came up, and, as soon as he learnt his name, shook him heartily by the hand.

"So you're Mr. Heron," he said, giving him an oddly interested and approving look. "Well, sir, we've come a good way for you, and I hope you're glad to see us. You'll find some acquaintances of yours below."

"Acquaintances?" said Heron, staring.

"There's one, at any rate," said the captain, pushing forward a seaman who was standing at his elbow, with a broad grin upon

his face. "Remember Mason of the *Arizona*, Mr. Heron? Ah, well! if you go into the cabin, you'll find someone you remember better." And then the captain laughed, and Heron saw a smile on the faces round him, which confused him a little, and made him fancy that something was going wrong. But he had not much time for reflection. He was half-led, half-pushed, down the companion ladder, but in such a good-humoured, friendly way that he did not know how to resist; and then the fair-haired young man opened a door and said, "He's here, sir!" in a tone of triumph, which was certainly not ill bestowed. And then there arose some sort of confusion, and Percival heard familiar voices, and felt that his hand was half-shaken off, and that somebody had kissed his cheek.

But for the moment he saw no one but Elizabeth.

They had known for some little time that their quest had been successful, that Percival was safe. They had seen him as he rowed from the island, as he entered the other boat, as he set his foot upon the schooner; and then they had withdrawn into the cabin, so that they might not meet him under the inquisitive, if friendly, eyes of the captain and his crew. Perhaps they had hardly made enough allowance for the shock of surprise and joy which their appearance was certain to cause Percival. His illness and long residence on the island had weakened his physical force. In almost the first time in his life he felt a sensation of faintness, which made him turn pale and stagger, as he recognised the faces of the two persons whom he loved better than any other in the world—his friend and his betrothed. A thought of Brian, too, embittered this his first meeting with Elizabeth. Only one person noticed that momentary paleness and unsteadiness of step; it was natural that Angela, a sympathetic spectator in the background, should see more than even Elizabeth, whose eyes were dim with emotions which she could not have defined.

Explanations were hurriedly given, or deferred till a future time. It was proposed that the whole party should go on shore, as everyone was anxious to see the place where Percival had spent so long a time. Even Rupert talked gleefully of "seeing" it. Percival had never seen his friend so exultant, so triumphant. And then, without knowing exactly how it happened, he found himself for a moment alone with Elizabeth, with whom he had hitherto exchanged only a hurried word or two of greeting. But her hand was still in his when he turned to speak to her alone.

"How beautiful you look!" he said. "If you knew what it is to me to see you again, Elizabeth!"

But it was not pure joy that sparkled in his eyes.

"Dear Percival! I am glad to see you, so glad to know that you are safe."

"You were sorry when you heard——"

"Oh," she said, "sorry is not the word. I could not forgive myself! I can never thank God enough that we have found you."

"Yes," said he, in a low tone. "I think you are glad that I am safe. I don't deserve that you should be, but——Well, never mind all that. Won't you give me one kiss, Elizabeth, my darling?" Then, in a more cheerful voice, "Come and see this wretched hole in which we have passed the last four months. It is an interesting place."

"Oh, Percival, it is just like yourself to say so!" said Elizabeth, smiling, but with tearful eyes. "And how pale and thin you are."

"You should have seen me a couple of months ago. I was a skeleton then," said Percival, as he opened the door for her. "A shell-fish diet is not one which I should recommend to an invalid.'

He was conscious of a question in her eyes which he did not mean to answer: he even found time to whisper a word to Jackson before they got into the boat. "Not a word about Mr. Luttrell," he whispered. "Say it was a steerage passenger who gave his name as Mackay. And don't say anything unless they ask you point blank." Jackson stared, but nodded an assent. He had a good deal of faith in Mr. Heron's wisdom.

Pale and gaunt as Percival undoubtedly was, Elizabeth thought that he looked very like his old self, as he stood frowning and biting his moustache in the bows, and looking shorewards as though he were afraid of something that he might see. This familiar expression—something between anxiety and annoyance—made Elizabeth smile to herself in spite of her agitation. Percival was not much changed.

She was sitting near him, and she longed to ask the question which was uppermost in her mind; but it was a difficult question to ask, seeing that he did not mention Brian Luttrell of his own accord. With an effort that made her turn pale, she bent forward at last, and said, fixing her eyes steadily upon him:—

"What news of the *Falcon*?"

He looked at her and hesitated, "Don't ask me now," he said, averting his face.

She was silent. He heard a little sigh, and glancing at her again, saw a look of heart-sick resignation in her white face which told him that she thought Brian must be dead. He felt a pang of compunction, and a desire to tell her all, then he

restrained himself. "She will not have to wait long," he thought, with a rather bitter smile.

When they landed, he quietly took her hand in his, and led her a little apart from the others. Angela and Rupert, Mrs. Norman and Mr. Fane, were, however, close behind. They followed Percival's footsteps as he showed the way to one of the huts which the men had occupied during their stay on the island. When they were near it, he turned and spoke to Rupert and Angela. "I am obliged to be very rude," he said. "Let me go into the hut with Miss Murray first of all. There is something I want her to see—something I must say. I will come back directly."

They saw that he was agitated, although he tried to speak as if nothing were the matter; and they drew back, respecting his emotion. As for Elizabeth, she waited: she could do nothing else. A little while ago she had said to herself that Percival was not changed: she thought differently now. He was changed; and yet she did not know how or why.

He stopped at the door, and turned to her. He still held her hand in a close, warm grasp. "Don't be startled," he said, gently. "I am going to surprise you very much. There is a friend of mine here: remember, I say, a friend of mine. He was saved from the wreck of the *Falcon*—do you understand whom I mean?"

And then he opened the door. "Brian," he said, in a voice that seemed strange Elizabeth, because of its measured quietness, "come here."

Elizabeth was trembling from head to foot. "Don't be afraid, child," he said, with more of an approach to his old tones and looks than she had yet heard or seen; "nobody will hurt you. Here he is—and I think I may fairly say that I have kept my word."

Brian Luttrell had been collecting the possessions which he thought that his comrades might wish to take with them as mementoes of their stay upon the island. He sprang up quickly at the first sound of Percival's voice, and then stood, as if turned to stone, looking at Elizabeth. The healthy colour faded from his face, leaving it nearly as pale as hers; he set his lips, and Percival could see that he clenched his hands. Elizabeth did not look up at all.

"Is this all the thanks I get," said Percival, in an ironical tone, "for introducing one cousin to another? I have taken a good deal of trouble for you both; I think that now you have met you might be civil to each other."

There was a perceptible pause. Elizabeth was the first to recover herself. She made a step forward and put out her hand,

which Brian instantly took in his. But neither of them spoke. Percival, with his back against the door, and his arms folded, observed them with a slightly humorous smile.

"You are surprised," he said to Elizabeth, "and I don't wonder. The last thing you expected was to find me on good terms with Brian Luttrell, was it not? And we have been on fairly good terms, have we not, Luttrell?"

"He saved my life twice," said Brian.

"And he nursed me through a fever," interposed Percival, with a huge laugh, "so we are quits. Oh, we have both played our parts in a highly creditable manner as long as we were on a desert island; but the island is inhabited now, and I think it's time that we returned to the habits of civilised life. As a matter of fact, I consider Brian Luttrell my deadliest enemy."

"You do nothing of the kind," said Brian, unable to repress a smile, although it hardly altered the look of pain that had come into his eyes. "Don't believe him, Miss Murray: I am glad to say that we are good friends."

"Idyllic simplicity! Don't you know that I did but dissemble, like the man in the play? How can we be friends when we both ——" he stopped short, looked at Elizabeth, and then back at Brian, and finished his sentence—"both want to marry the same woman?"

"Heron, you are going too far. Don't make these allusions; they are unsuitable," said Brian.

Elizabeth had winced as if she had received a blow. Percival laughed in their faces.

"Out of taste, isn't it?" he said. "I ought to ignore the circumstances under which we meet, and talk as if we were in a drawing-room. I'm not such a fool. Look here, you two: let us talk sensibly. I have surely a right to demand something of you both, have I not?"

"Yes, yes, indeed," they answered.

"Then, for Heaven's sake, speak the truth! Here have I been chasing Brian half over the world, getting myself shipwrecked and thrown on desert islands, and what not, all because I wanted you, Elizabeth, to acknowledge that I was not such a mean and selfish wretch as you concluded me to be. Have I cleared myself? or, perhaps I should say, have I expiated the crime that I did commit?"

"It was no crime," said Brian, warmly. "No one who knows you could think you capable of meanness."

"I was not speaking to you, Mr. Luttrell," said Percival. "You're not in it at all. I am having a little conversation with my cousin. Well, Elizabeth, what do you say?"

"I think you have been most kind and generous," she said.

"Then I may retire with a good character? And, to come back to what I said before, as we both wish——"

"You are not generous now, Heron," said Brian, quickly.

"No! But I will be—sometime. You seem very anxious to repudiate all desire to marry my cousin. Have you changed your mind?"

"Percival, I will not listen. Have you brought me here only to insult me?" cried Elizabeth, passionately.

Percival smiles. "I am waiting for Brian Luttrell's answer," he replied, looking at him steadily.

"I do not know what answer you expect," said Brian, "unless you want me to say the truth—that I loved Elizabeth Murray with all my heart and soul, before I knew that she had promised to be your wife; and that as I loved her then, I love her still. It is my misfortune—or my privilege—to do so; I scarcely know which. And for that reason, as you know, I have earnestly wished never to cross her path again, lest I should trouble her or distress her in any way."

"Fate has been against you," said Percival, grimly. "You seem destined to cross her path in one way or another—and mine, too. It is time all this came to an end. You think I am saying disagreeable things for the mere pleasure of saying them; but it is not so. I will beg your pardon afterwards if I hurt you. What I want to say is this: I withdraw all my claims, if I had any, to Miss Murray's hand. I release her from any promise that she ever made to me. She is as free to choose as—as you are yourself, or as I am. We have both offered ourselves to Miss Murray at different times. It is for her to say which of us she prefers."

There was a silence. Elizabeth's face changed from white to red, from red to white again. At last she looked up, and looked at Brian. He came to her side at once, as if he saw that she wanted help.

"Percival," he said, "you are very generous in act: be generous in word as well. Let the matter rest. It is cruel to ask her to decide."

"It seems to me that she has decided," said Percival, with a sharp, short laugh, "seeing that she lets you speak for her."

"Oh, Percival, forgive me," murmured Elizabeth.

A spasm of pain seemed to pass over his face as he turned towards her: then it grew strangely gentle. "My dear," he said, "I never pretended to be anything but a very selfish fellow; but if I can secure your happiness, I shall feel that I have accomplished one, at least, of the ends of my life. There!"—with a

laugh: "I think that's well said. Haven't I known for months that I should be obliged to give you up to Luttrell in the long run? And the worst is, that I haven't the satisfaction of hating him through it all, because we have managed—I don't know how—to fight our way to a sort of friendship. Eh, Brian? And now I'll leave you to yourself for a few minutes, and you can settle the matter while you have the opportunity."

He walked out of the hut before they could protest. But the smile died away from his lips when he had left them, and was succeeded for a few minutes by an expression of intense pain. He stood and looked at the sea; perhaps it was the dazzling reflection of the sun upon the waters which made his eyes so dim. After five minutes' reflection, he shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"There's one great consolation in returning to civilised life," he said, strolling up to the group of friends as they returned from a walk round the island. "That is—tobacco! Fate can't do much harm to the man who smokes." And he accepted a cigarette from Mr. Fane. "Now," he continued, "fortune may buffet me as she pleases; I do not care. I have not smoked for four months. Consequently I am as happy as a king."

He smoked with evident satisfaction; but Angela thought that she discerned a look of trouble upon his face.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ANGELA.

"So it was not you after all, sir," said Captain Somers, surveying Heron with some surprise, and then glancing towards a secluded corner, where Brian and Elizabeth were absorbed in an apparently very interesting conversation. "Well, I must have made a mistake. I didn't know anything about the other gentleman."

"Oh, we kept him dark," returned Percival, lightly. "My cousin didn't want her affairs talked about. They make a nice couple, don't they?"

"Ay, sir, they do. Mr. Vivian made a mistake, too, perhaps," said Captain Somers, with some curiosity.

"We're all liable to make mistakes at times," replied Percival, smiling. "I don't think they've made one now, at any rate."

And then he left Captain Somers, and seated himself on a chair, which happened to be close to the one occupied by Angela Vivian. Brian and Elizabeth were still within the range of his vision: although he was not watching them he was perfectly conscious of their movements. He saw Brian take Elizabeth's hand in his and raise it gently to his lips. The two did not know

that they could be seen. Percival stifled a sigh, and twisted his chair round a little, so as to turn his back to them. This manœuvre brought him face to face with Angela.

"They look very happy and comfortable over there, don't they?" he said.

"I think they will be very happy," she answered.

"I shouldn't wonder." He moved restlessly in his chair, and looked towards the sea. "You know the story," he said. "I suppose you mean she will be happier with him than with me?"

"She loves him," said Angela scarcely above her breath.

"I suppose so," he answered, dryly. Then, after a pause—"Love is a mighty queer matter, it seems to me. Here have I been trying to win her heart for the last five years, and, just when I think I am succeeding, in steps a fellow whom she has never seen before, who does in a month or two what I failed to do in years."

"They have a great deal to thank you for," said Angela.

Percival shook his head.

"That's a mere delusion of their generous hearts," he said. "I've been a selfish brute: that's all."

It seemed easier to him, after this, to discuss the matter with Angela from every possible point of view. He told her more than he had told anyone in the world of the secret workings of his mind; she alone had any true idea of what it had cost him to give Elizabeth up. He took a great deal of pleasure in dissecting his own character, and it soothed and flattered him that she should listen with so much interest. He was always in a better temper when he had been talking to Angela. He did most of the talking—it must be owned that he liked to hear himself talk—and she made a perfect listener. He, in turn, amused and interested her very much. She had never come across a man of his type before. His trenchant criticisms of literature, his keen delight in politics, his lively argumentativeness, were charming to her. He had always had the knack of quarrelling with Elizabeth, even when he was most devoted to her; but he did not quarrel with Angela. She quieted him; he hardly knew how to be irritable in her presence.

The story of Kitty's marriage excited his deepest ire. He was indignant with his sister, disgusted with Hugo Luttrell. He himself told it, with some rather strong expressions of anger, to Brian, who listened in perfect silence.

"What can you say for your cousin?" said Percival, turning upon him fiercely. "What sort of a fellow is he? Do you consider him fit to marry my sister?"

"No, I don't," Brian answered. "I am sorry to say so, but I

don't think Hugo is in the least to be relied on. I have been fond of him, but——"

"A screw loose somewhere, is there? I thought as much."

"He may do better now that he is married," said Brian. But he felt that it was poor comfort.

They went straight back to England, and it was curious to observe how naturally and continuously a certain division of the party was always taking place. Brian and Elizabeth were, of course, a great deal together; it seemed equally inevitable that Percival should pair off with Angela, and that Mrs. Norman, Rupert Vivian, and Mr. Fane should be left to entertain each other.

It was on the last day of the voyage that Brian sought out Percival and took him by the arm. "Look here, Heron," he said. "I have never thanked you for what you have done for me."

Percival was smoking. He took his pipe out of his mouth, and said, "Don't," very curtly, and then replaced the meerschaum, and puffed at it energetically.

"But I must."

"Stop," said Heron. "Don't go on till you've heard me speak." He took his pipe in his hand and knocked it meditatively against the bulwarks. "There's a great deal that might be said on both sides. Do you think that any of us have acted wisely or rightly throughout this business?"

"I don't think I have. I think Elizabeth has."

"Oh, Elizabeth. Well, she's a woman. Women have a strange sort of pleasure in acting properly. But I don't think that even your Elizabeth was quite perfect. Now, don't knock me down; she's my cousin, and I knew her years before you did. She's your cousin, too, by the way; but that does not signify. What I wanted to say was this:—We have all been more or less idiotic. I made a confounded fool of myself once or twice, and, begging your pardon, Brian, I think you did, too."

"I think I did," said Brian, reflectively.

"Elizabeth will take care of you now, and see that you have your due complement of commonsense," said Percival. "Well, look here. I've been wrong and I've been right at times; so have you. I have something to thank you for, and perhaps you feel the same sort of thing towards me. I think it is a pity to make a sort of profit and loss calculation as to which of the two has been the more wronged, or has the more need to be grateful. Let bygones be bygones. I want you and Elizabeth to promise me not to speak or think of those old days again. We can't be friends if you do. I was very hard on you both sometimes: and—well, you know the rest. If you forgive, you must also forget."

Brian looked at him for a moment. "Upon my word, Percival," he said, warmly, "I can't imagine why she did not prefer you to me. You're quite the most large-hearted man I ever knew."

"Oh, come, that's too strong," said Heron, carelessly. "You're a cut above me, you know, in every way. You will suit her admirably. As for me, I'm a rough, coarse sort of a fellow—a newspaper correspondent, a useful literary hack—that's all. I never quite understood until—until lately—what my position was in the eyes of the world."

"Why, I thought you considered your profession a very high one," said Brian.

"So I do. Only I'm at the bottom of the tree, and I want to be at the top."

There was a pause. A little doubt was visible upon Brian's face: Percival saw it and understood.

"There's one thing you needn't do," he said, with a sort of haughty abruptness. "Don't offer me help of any kind. I won't stand it. I don't want charity. If I could be glad that I was not going to marry Elizabeth, it would be because she is a rich woman. I wonder, by-the-bye, what Dino Vasari is going to do."

They had not heard of Dino's death when Percival left England.

"If I were you," Percival went on, "I should not stand on ceremony. I should get a special licence in London and marry her at once. You'll have a bother about settlements and provisions and compromises without end, if you don't."

Brian smiled, and even coloured a little at the proposition. "I could not ask her to do it," he said.

"Then I'll ask her," said Percival with his in imitable *sang-froid*. "In the very nick of time, here she comes. Mademoiselle, I was talking about you."

Elizabeth smiled. The colour had come back to her cheeks, the brightness to her eyes. She was the incarnation of splendid health and happiness. Percival looked from her to Brian, remarking silently the gravity and nobleness of his expression and the singular refinement of his features, which could be seen so much more plainly, now that he had returned to his old fashion of wearing a moustache and small pointed beard, instead of the disfigur. ing mass of hair with which he had once striven to disguise his face. Percival was clean shaven, except for the heavy, black moustache, which he fingered as he spoke.

"You are my children by adoption," he said, cheerfully, "and I am going to speak to you as a grandfather might. Elizabeth, my opinion is, that if you want to avoid vexatious delays, you had better get married to this gentleman here before you present yourself in Scotland at all. You have no idea how much it would

simplify matters. Brian won't suggest such a thing; he is afraid you will think that he wants to make ducks and drakes of your money——"

"His money," said Elizabeth.

"Well, his or yours, or that Italian fellow's—I don't see that it matters much. Why don't you stop in London, get a special licence, and be married from Vivian's house? I know he would be delighted."

"It is easy to make the suggestion," said Brian, "but perhaps Elizabeth would not like such haste."

"I will do what you like," said Elizabeth.

"Let me congratulate you," remarked Percival to Brian; "you are about to marry that treasure amongst wives—a woman who tries to please you and not herself. Well, I have broken the ice, settle the matter as you please."

"No, Percival, don't go," said Elizabeth. But he laughed, shook his head, and left them to themselves.

As usual he went to Angela, and allowed himself to look as gloomy as he chose. She asked him what was the matter.

"I have been playing the heavy father, and giving away the bride," he said. And then he told her what he had advised.

"You want to have it over," she said, looking at him with her soft, serious eyes.

"To tell the truth, I believe I do."

"It is hard on you, now."

"Not a bit," said Percival, taking a seat beside her. "I ought not to mind. If I were Luttrell, I probably should glory in self-sacrifice, and say I didn't mind. Unfortunately I do. But nothing will drive me to say that it is hard. All's fair in love and war. Brian has proved himself the better man."

"Not the stronger man," said Angela, almost involuntarily.

"You think not? I don't think I have been strong! I have been wretchedly weak sometimes. Ah, there they come; they have settled it between them. They look bright, don't they?"

Angela made no answer, she felt a little indignant with Brian and Elizabeth for looking bright. It was decidedly inconsiderate towards Percival.

But Percival made no show of his wound to anybody except Angela. He seemed heartily glad when he heard that Elizabeth had consented to the speedy marriage in London, he was as cheerful in manner as usual, he held his head high, and ate and drank and laughed in his accustomed way. Even Elizabeth was deceived, and thought he was cured of his love for her. But the restless gleam of his eye and the dark fold between his brow, in

spite of his merriment, told a different tale to the two who understood him best—Brian and Angela.

The marriage took place from Rupert's house, according to Percival's suggestion. It was a quiet wedding, and the guests were very various in quality. Mr. Heron came from Scotland for the occasion, Rupert and his sister, Mrs. Norman, Captain Somers and the two seamen—Jackson and Mason, were all present. Percival alone did not come. He had said nothing about his intention of staying away, but sent a note of excuse at the last moment. He had resumed his newspaper work, and a sudden call upon him required instant attention. Elizabeth was deeply disappointed. She had looked upon his presence at her wedding as the last assurance of his forgiveness, and she and Brian both felt that something was lacking from their felicity when Percival did not come.

They started for Scotland as soon as the wedding was over, and it was not until the following week that Brian received a bulky letter which had been waiting for him at the place where he had directed Dino Vasari to address his letters. He opened it eagerly, expecting to find a long letter from Dino himself. He took out only the announcement of his death.

There was, however, a very lengthy document from Padre Cristoforo, which Brian and Elizabeth read with burning hearts and tearful or indignant eyes. In this letter, Padre Cristoforo set forth, calmly and dispassionately, what he knew of poor Dino's story, and there were many things in it which Brian learnt now for the first time. But the Prior said nothing about Elizabeth. When Brian had read the letter, he leaned over the table, and took his wife's hand as he spoke.

"Did you ever see him?" he asked.

"I saw a young man with Mr. Colquhoun on the day when he came to Netherglen. But I hardly remember his face."

"You would have loved him?"

"Yes," she said, "for your sake."

"And now, what shall we do? Now we are on our guard against Hugo. To think that any man should be so vile!"

"Our poor little Kitty!" murmured Elizabeth. "Surely she has found out her mistake. I could never understand that marriage. She looked very unhappy afterwards. But we were all unhappy then."

"I had forgotten what happiness was like until I saw your face again," said Brian.

"But about Hugo, love?" she said, replying to his glance with a smile, which showed that for her at least the fullest earthly bliss had been attained. "Can we not go to Netherglen and send

him away? I do not like to think that he is with your mother."

"Nor I," said Brian. "Let us go and see."

That very evening they set out for Netherglen.

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Meanwhile, Percival Heron was calling at the Vivians' house in Kensington. Angela, who had hitherto seen him in very rough and ready costume, was a little surprised when he appeared one afternoon attired in clothes of the most faultless cut, and looking as handsome and idle as if he had never done anything in his life but pay morning calls. He had come, perhaps by accident, perhaps by design, on the day when she was at home to visitors from three to six; and, although she had not been very long in London, her drawing-room was crowded with visitors. The story of the expedition to the Rocas Reef had made a sensation in London society; everybody was anxious to see the heroes and heroines of the story, and Percival soon found himself as much a centre of attraction as Angela herself.

She watched him keenly, wondering whether he would be annoyed by the attention he was receiving; but his face wore a tranquil smile of amusement which reassured her. Once he made a movement as if to go, but she managed to say to him in passing:—

"Do not go yet unless you are obliged. Rupert is out with Mr. Fane."

"I did not come to see Rupert," said Percival, with a laugh in his brilliant eyes.

"I have something to say to you, too," she went on seriously.

"Really? Then I will wait."

He had to wait some time before the room was cleared of guests. When at last they found themselves alone, the day was closing in, and the wood fire cast strange flickering lights and shadows over the walls. The room was full of the scent of violets and white hyacinths. Percival leaned back in an easy chair, with an air of luxurious enjoyment. And yet he was not quite as much at his ease as he looked.

"You had something to say to me," he began, boldly. "I know perfectly well what it is. You think I ought to have come to the wedding, and you want to tell me so."

"Your conscience seems to say more than I should venture to,' said Angela, smiling.

"I had an engagement, as I wrote in my letter."

"One that could not be broken?"

"To tell the truth, I was not in an amiable mood. If I had come I should probably have hurt their feelings more than by

taying away. I should have said something savage. Well,"—as he saw her lips move—"what were you going to say?"

"Something very severe."

"Say it by all means."

"That you are trying to excuse your own selfishness by the plea of want of self-control. The excuse is worse than the action itself."

"I am very selfish, I know," said Percival, complacently. "I'm not at all ashamed of it. Why should I not consult my own comfort?"

"Why should you add one drop to the bitterness of Brian's cup?"

"I like that," said Percival, in an ironical tone. "It shows the extent of a woman's sense of justice. I beg your pardon, Miss Vivian, for saying so. But in my opinion Brian is a lucky fellow."

"You forget——"

"What do I forget? This business about his identity is all happily over, and he is married to the woman of his choice. I wish I had half his luck!"

"You have forgotten, Mr. Heron," said Angela, in a tone that showed how deeply she was moved, "that Brian has had a great sorrow—a great loss. I do not think life can ever be the same to him again—as it can never be the same to me—since—Richard—died."

Her voice sank and faltered. For an instant there was a silence, in which Percival felt shocked and embarrassed at his own want of thought. He had forgotten. He had been thinking solely of Brian's relations with Elizabeth. It had not occurred to him for a long time that Angela had once been on the point of marriage with the man—the brother—whom Brian Luttrell had shot dead at Netherglen.

He said, "I beg your pardon," in a constrained, reluctant voice, and sat in silence, feeling that he ought to go, yet not liking to tear himself away. For the first time he was struck by the beauty of Angela's patience. How she must have suffered! he thought to himself, as he remembered her sisterly care of Brian, her silence about her own great loss, her quiet acceptance of the inevitable. And he had prosed by the hour to this woman about his own griefs and love-troubles! What an egotist she must think him! What a fool! Percival felt hot about the ears with self-contempt. He rose to go, feeling that he should not venture to present himself to her again very easily. He did not even like to say that he was ashamed of his lapse of memory.

Angela rose, too. She would have spoken sooner, but she had been swallowing down the rising tears. She very seldom mentioned Richard Luttrell now.

They were standing, still silent, in this attitude of expectancy—each thinking that the other would speak first—when the door opened, and Mr. Vivian came in. Percival hailed his arrival with a feeling between impatience and relief. Rupert wanted him to stay, but he said that he must go at once; business called him away.

"There is a letter for you, Angela," said Vivian. "It was on the hall-table. Fane gave it me. I hope my sister has been scolding you for not coming to the wedding, Heron. It went off very well, but we wanted you. Have you heard the latest news from Egypt?"

And then they launched into a discussion of politics, from which they were presently diverted by a remark made by Angela as she laid her hand gently on Rupert's arm.

"Excuse me," she said. "I think I had better show both you and Mr. Heron this letter. It is from Mrs. Hugo Luttrell."

"From Kitty!" said the brother. Rupert's face changed a little, but he did not speak. Angela handed the letter first to Percival.

"DEAR MISS VIVIAN," Kitty's letter began, "I am sorry to trouble you, but I want to know whether you will give a message for me to Mr. Brian Luttrell. Mrs. Luttrell is a little better, and is able to say one or two words. She calls for 'Brian' almost incessantly. I should be so glad if he would come, and Elizabeth too. If you know where they are, will you tell them so? But they must not say that I have written to you. And please do not answer this letter. If they cannot come, could not you? It is asking a great deal, I know; but Mrs. Luttrell would be happier if you were with her, and I should be so glad, too. I have nobody here whom I can trust, and I do not know what to do. I think you would help me if you knew all.—Yours very truly,

"CATHERINE LUTTRELL."

Percival read it through aloud, then laid it down in silence. "What does she mean?" he said, perplexedly.

"It means that there is something wrong," answered Rupert. "Are your people at Strathleckie now, Percival?"

"No, they are in London."

"Why don't you go down? You have not seen her since her marriage?"

"Hum. I haven't time."

"Then I will go."

"And I with you," said Angela, quickly. But Rupert shook his head.

"No, dear, not you. We will write for Brian and Elizabeth. And, excuse me, Percival, but if your sister is in any

difficulty, I think it would be only kind if you went to her assistance."

"Yes, Mr. Heron," said Angela. "Do go. Do help her if you can."

And this time Percival did not refuse.

CHAPTER XLIX.

KITTY'S WARNING.

"It's an odd thing," said Percival, with a puzzled look, "that Kitty won't see me."

"Won't see you?" ejaculated Rupert.

They had arrived at Dunmuir the previous day, and located themselves at the hotel. Arthur Fane had come with them, but he was at present in the smoking-room, and the two friends had their parlour to themselves.

"Exactly. Sent word she was ill."

"Through whom?"

"A servant. A man whom I have seen with Luttrell several times. Stevens, they call him."

"Did you see Hugo Luttrell?"

"No. I heard his voice."

"He was in the house then?"

"Yes. I suppose he did not care to see me."

"You are curiously unsuspicious for a man of your experience," said Vivian, resting his head on one hand with a sort of sigh.

Percival started to his feet. "You think that it was a blind?" he cried.

"No doubt of it. He does not want you to see your sister."

"What for? Good Heavens! you don't mean to insinuate that he does not treat her well?"

"No. I don't mean to insinuate anything."

"Then tell me in plain English what you do mean."

"I can't, Percival. I have vague suspicions, that is all."

"It was a love-match," said Percival, after a moment's pause. "They ought to be happy together."

Rupert was silent a moment; then he said, in a low voice—

"I doubt whether it was a love-match exactly."

"What in Heaven or earth do you mean?" said Percival, staring. "What else could it be?"

But before Vivian could make any response, young Fane entered the room with the air of one who has had good news.

"Mr. Colquhoun asks me to tell you that he has just had a letter from Mr. Brian Luttrell, sir. He is to meet Mr. and Mrs. Luttrell at the station at nine o'clock, but their arrival is not to

be made generally known. Only hearing that you were here, he thought it better to let you know."

"They could not have got Angela's letter," said Rupert. "I wonder why they are coming. It is very opportune."

"If you don't mind," remarked Percival, "I'll go and see Mr. Colquhoun. I want to know what he thinks of our adventures. And he may tell me something about affairs at Netherglen."

He departed on his errand, whistling as he went; but the whistle died on his lips as soon as he was out of Rupert's hearing. He resumed his geniality of bearing, however, when he stood in Mr. Colquhoun's office.

"Well, Mr. Colquhoun," he said, "I think we have all taken you by surprise now."

The old man looked at him keenly over his spectacles.

"I won't say but what you have," he said, with an emphasis on the pronoun. Percival laughed cheerily.

"Thanks. That's a compliment."

"It's just the truth. You've done a very right thing, and a generous one, Mr. Heron; and I shall esteem it an honour to shake hands with you." And Mr. Colquhoun got up from his office-chair, and held out his hand with a look of congratulation. Percival gave it a good grip, and resumed, in an airier tone than ever.

"You do me proud, as a Yankee would say, Mr. Colquhoun. I'm sure I don't see what I've done to merit this mark of approval. Popular report says that I jilted Miss Murray in the most atrocious manner; but then you always wanted me to do that, I remember."

"Lad, lad," said the old man, reprovingly, "what is all this bluster and swagger about? Take the credit of having made a sacrifice for once in your life, and don't be too ready to say it cost you nothing. Man, didn't I see you on the street just now, with your hands in your pockets and your face as black as my shoe? You hadn't those wrinkles in your brow when you started for Pernambuco six months ago. It's pure childishness to pretend that you feel nothing and care for nothing, when we all know that you've had a sore trouble and a hard fight of it. But you've conquered, Mr. Heron, as I thought you would."

Percival sat perfectly still. His face wore at first an expression of great surprise. Then it relaxed, and became intently grave and even sad, but the defiant bitterness disappeared.

"I think you're right," he said, after a long pause. "Of course, I've—I've been hit pretty hard. But I don't want people to know. I don't want her to know. And I don't mean either to snivel or to sulk. But I see what you mean; and I think you may be right."

Mr. Colquhoun made some figures on his blotting-pad, and did not look up for a few minutes. He was glad that his visitor had dropped his sneering tone. And, indeed, Percival dropped it for the remainder of his visit, and, although he talked of scarcely anything but trivial topics, he went away feeling as if Mr. Colquhoun was no longer an enemy, but a confidential friend. On his return to the hotel, he found that Vivian had gone out with Arthur Fane. He occupied himself with strolling idly about Dunmuir till they came back.

Vivian had ordered a dog-cart, and got Fane to drive him up to Nethergien. He thought it possible that he might gain admittance, although Percival had not done so. But he was mistaken. He was assured by the impassive Stevens that Mrs. Hugo Luttrell was too unwell to see visitors, and that Mr. Luttrell was not at home. Vivian was forced to drive away, baffled and impatient.

"Drive me round by the loch," he said to Fane. "There is a road running close to the water. I should like to go that way. What does the loch look like to-day, Fane? Is it bright?"

"Yes, very bright."

"And the sky is clear?"

"Clear in the south and east. There are clouds coming up from the north-west; we shall have rain to-night."

They drove on silently, until at last Fane said, in rather a hesitating tone:—

"There is a lady making signs to us to turn round to wait, sir. She is a little way behind us."

"A lady? Stop then; stop at once. Is she near? What is she like? Is she young?"

"Very young, very slight. She is close to us now," said Fane, as he checked his horse.

Rupert bent forward with a look of eager expectation. He heard a footstep on the road; surely he knew it? He knew the voice well enough as it spoke his name.

"Mr. Vivian!"

"Kitty!" he said, eagerly. Then, in a soberer tone: "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Luttrell, I have just been calling at Netherglen and heard that you were ill."

"I am not ill, but I do not see visitors," said Kitty, in a constrained voice. "I wanted to speak to you; I saw you from the garden. I thought I should never make you hear."

"Will you wait one moment until I get down from my high perch? Fane will help me; I feel rather helpless at present."

"Can you turn back with me for a few minutes?"

"Certainly."

They walked for a few steps side by side, he with his hand

resting on her arm for the sake of guidance. The soft spring breezes played upon their faces; the scent of wild flowers came to their nostrils, the song of building birds to their ears. But they noted none of these things.

Vivian stopped short at last, and spoke authoritatively.

"Now, Kitty, what does this mean? Why can you not see your brother and me when we call upon you?"

"My husband does not wish it," she said, faintly.

"Why not?"

"I don't know." Then, in a more decided tone: "He likes to thwart my wishes, that is all."

"That was why you warned Angela not to answer your letter?"

"Yes." Then, under her breath:—"I was afraid."

"But, my child, what are you afraid of?"

She uttered a short, stifled sob.

"I can't tell you," she said.

"Surely," said Rupert, "he would not hurt you?"

"No," she said, "perhaps not. I do not know."

There was a dreariness in her tone which went to Rupert's heart.

"Take courage," he said. "Brian and Elizabeth will be in Dunmuir to-night. Shall they come to see you?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" cried Kitty. "Let them come at once—at once, tell them. You will see them, will you not?" She had forgotten Rupert's blindness. "If they come, I shall be prevented from meeting them, perhaps; I know I shall not be allowed to talk to them alone. Tell Mr. Luttrell to come and live at Netherglen. Tell him to turn us out. I shall be thankful to him all my life if he turns us out. I want to go!"

"You want to leave Netherglen?"

"Yes, yes, as quick as possible. Tell him that Mrs. Luttrell wants him—that she is sorry for having been so harsh to him. I know it. I can see it in her eyes. I tell her everything that I hear about him, and I know she likes it. She is pleased that he has married Elizabeth. Tell him to come to-night."

"To-night?" said Rupert. He began to fear that her troubles had affected her brain.

"Yes, to-night. Remember to tell him so. To-morrow may be too late. Now, go, go. He may come home at any moment; and if he saw you"—she caught her breath with a sob—"if he saw you here, I think that he would kill me."

"Kitty, Kitty! It cannot be so bad as this."

"Indeed, it is—and worse than you know," she said, bitterly. "Now let me lead you back. Thank you for coming. And tell Brian—be sure you tell Brian to come home to-night. It is his

right, nobody can keep him out. But not alone. Tell him not to come alone."

It was with these words ringing in his ears that Rupert was driven back to Dunmuir.

Brian and his wife arrived about nine o'clock in the evening, as they had said in the letter which Mr. Colquhoun had received. Vivian, wrought up by this time to a high pitch of excitement, did not wait five minutes before pouring the whole of his story into Brian's ear. Brian's eyes flashed, his face looked stern as he listened to Kitty's message.

"The hound!" he said. "The cur! I expected almost as much. I know now what I never dreamt of before. He is a cowardly villain, and I will expose him this very night."

"Remember poor Kitty," said Elizabeth.

"I will spare her as much as possible, but I will not spare him. Do you know, Vivian, that he tried to murder Dino Vasari? There is not a blacker villain on the face of the earth. And to think that all this time my mother has been at his mercy!"

"His mother!" ejaculated Mr. Colquhoun in Percival's ear, with a chuckle of extreme satisfaction, "I'm glad he's come back to that nomenclature. Blood's thicker than water; and I'll stand to it, as I always have done, that this Brian's the right one after all."

"It's the only one there is, now," said Percival, "Vasari is dead."

"Poor laddie! Well, he was just too good for this wicked world," said the lawyer, with great cheerfulness, "and it would be a pity to grudge him to another. And what are you after now, Brian?"

"I'm going up to Netherglen."

"Without your dinner?"

"What do I care for dinner when my mother's life may be in danger?" said Brian.

"Tut, tut! Why should it be in danger to-night of all nights in the year?" said Mr. Colquhoun, testily.

"Why? Can you ask? Have you not told me yourself that my mother made a will before her illness, leaving all that she possessed to Hugo? Depend upon it, he is anxious to get Netherglen. When he hears that I have come back he will be afraid. He knows that I can expose him most thoroughly. He is quite capable of trying to put an end to my mother's life to-night. And that is what your sister meant."

"Don't forget her warning. Don't go alone," said Vivian.

"You'll come with me, Percival," said Brian. "And you Fane."

"If Fane and Percival go, you must let me go, too," remarked Vivian, but Brian shook his head, and Elizabeth interposed.

"Will you stay with us, Mr. Vivian? Do not leave Mr. Colquhoun and me alone."

"I'll not be left behind," said Mr. Colquhoun, smartly; "you may depend upon that, Mrs Brian. You and Mr. Vivian must take care of my wife; but I shall go, because it strikes me that I shall be needed. Four of us, that'll fill the brougham. And we'll put the constable, Macpherson, on the box."

"I must resign myself to be useless," said Vivian, with a smile which had some pain in it.

"Useless, my dear fellow? We should never have been warned but for you," answered Brian, giving him a warm grasp of the hand before he hurried off.

In a very short time the carriage was ready. The gentlemen had hastily swallowed some refreshment, and were eager to start. Brian turned back for a moment to bid his wife farewell, and received a whispered caution with the kiss that she pressed upon his face.

"Spare Kitty as much as you can, love. And take care of your dear self."

Then they set out for Netherglen.

The drive was almost a silent one. Each member of the party was more or less absorbed in his own thoughts, and Brian's face wore a look of stern determination which seemed to impose quietude upon the others. It was he who took command of the expedition, as naturally as Percival had taken command of the sailors upon the Rocas Reef.

"We will not drive up to the house," he said, as they came in sight of the white gates of Netherglen. "We should only be refused admittance. I have told the driver where to stop."

"It's a blustering night," said Mr. Colquhoun.

"All the better for us," replied Brian. "We are not so likely to be overheard."

"Why, you don't think that they would keep us out, do you, Brian, my lad? Hugo hasn't the right to do that, you know. He's never said me nay to my face as yet."

"Depend upon it, he won't show," said Percival, contemptuously. "He'll pretend to be asleep, or away from home, or something of the sort."

"I am sure that he will try to keep us out, if he can," said Brian, "and, therefore, I am not going to give him the chance. I think I can get into the house by a side door."

The carriage had drawn up in the shade of some overhanging beech trees whilst they were speaking. The four men got out,

and stood for a moment in the road. The night was a rough one, as Mr. Colquhoun had said; the wind blew in fierce but fitful gusts; the sky was covered with heavy, scurrying clouds.

Every now and then the wind sent a great dash of rain into their faces, it seemed as if a tempest were preparing, and the elements were about to be let loose.

"We are like thieves," said Heron, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't care for this style of work. I should walk boldly up to the door and give a thundering peal with the knocker."

"You don't know Hugo as well as I do," responded Brian.

"Thank Heaven, no. Are you armed, Fane?"

"I've got a stick," said Fane, with gusto.

"And I've got a revolver. Now for the fray."

"We shall not want arms of that kind," said Brian. "If you are ready, please follow me."

He led the way through the gates and down the drive, then turned off at right angles and pursued his way along a narrow path, across which the wet laurels almost touched, and had to be pushed back. They reached at last the side entrance of which Brian had spoken. He tried the handle, and gently shook the door; but it did not move. He tried it a second time—with no result.

"Locked!" said Percival, significantly.

"That does not matter," responded Brian. "Look here; but do not speak."

He felt in the darkness for one of the panels of the door. Evidently he knew that there was some hidden spring. The panel suddenly flew back, leaving a space of two feet square, through which it was easy for Brian to insert his hand and arm, draw back a bolt, and turn the key which had been left in the lock. It was a door which he and Richard had known of old, They had kept the secret, however, to themselves; and it was possible that Hugo had never learned it. Even Mr. Colquhoun uttered a faint inarticulate murmur of surprise.

The door was open before them, but they were still standing outside in the wet shrubbery, their feet on the damp grass, the evergreens trickling water in their faces, when an unexpected sound fell upon their ears.

Somewhere, in another part of the building—probably in the front of the house—one of the upper windows was thrown violently open. Then a woman's voice, raised in shrill tones of fear or pain, rang out between the fitful gusts of wind and rain.

"Help! Help! Help!"

There was no time to lose. The four men threw caution to the

winds, and dashed headlong into the winding passages of the dark old house.

. . . . . .

When Rupert Vivian drove away from Netherglen, Kitty stood for some time in the lane where they had been walking, and gazed after him with painful, anxious interest. The dog-cart was well out of sight before she turned, with a heavy sigh, preparing herself to walk back to the house. And then, for the first time, she became aware that her husband was standing at some little distance from her, and was coolly watching her, with folded arms and an evil smile upon his face.

"I have been wondering how long you meant to stand there, watching Vivian drive away," he said, advancing slowly to meet her. "Did you ask him about his wife?"

Kitty thought of her conversation with Rupert at Strathleckie—a conversation of which she had kept Hugo in ignorance—and coloured vividly.

"His wife is dead," she said, in a smothered tone.

"Oh, then, you did ask him?" said Hugo, looking at her. "Is that what he came to tell you?"

Kitty did not reply. She had thrown a shawl over her head before coming out, and she stood drawing the edges of it closer across her bosom with nervous, twitching fingers and averted face.

"Why did you come out in that way?" queried her husband. "You look like a madwoman in that shawl. You looked more like one than ever when you ran after that dog-cart, waving your hands for Vivian to stop. He did not want to see you or to be forced into an interview."

"Then you have been watching me?"

"I always watch you. Women are such fools that they require watching. What did you want to speak to Vivian about?"

"I will not tell you," said Kitty, suddenly growing pale.

"Then it is something that you ought not to have said. I understand your ways by this time. Come here, close to me." She came like a frightened child. "Look at me, kiss me." She obeyed, after some faint show of reluctance. He put his arm round her and kissed her several times, on cheek and brow and lips. "You don't like that," he said, releasing her at last with a smile. "That is why I do it. You are mine now, remember, not Vivian's. Now tell me what you said to him."

"Never!" said Kitty, with a gasp.

A change passed over Hugo's face.

"Who is with Vivian and your brother?" he demanded "Has Brian Luttrell come back?"

But he could not make her answer him. His hand was no longer on her arm, and with a desperate effort of will, she fled with sudden swiftness from him towards the house. He stood and watched her, with a look of sullen anger darkening his face. "She is not to be trusted," he muttered to himself "I must finish my work to-night."

CHAPTER L.

MRS. LUTTRELL'S ROOM.

KITTY made her way to her own room, and was not surprised to find that in a few moments Hugo followed her thither. She was sitting in a low chair, striving to command her agitated thoughts, and school herself into some semblance of tranquility, when he entered. She fully expected that he would try again to force from her the history of her interview with Vivian, but he did nothing of the kind. He threw himself into a chair opposite to her, and looked at her in silence, while she tried her best not to see his face at all. Those long, lustrous eyes, that low brow and perfectly-modelled mouth and chin, had grown hideous in her sight.

But when he spoke he took her completely by surprise.

"You had better begin to pack up your things," he said. "We shall go to the South of France either this week or next."

"And leave Mrs. Luttrell?" breathed Kitty.

His lips stretched themselves into something meant for a smile, but it was a very joyless smile.

"And leave Mrs. Luttrell," he repeated.

"But, Hugo, what will people say?"

"They won't find fault," he answered. "The matter will be simple enough when the time comes. Pack your boxes, and leave the rest to me."

"She is much better, certainly," hesitated Kitty, "but I do not like leaving her to servants."

"She is no better," said Hugo, rising, and turning a malevolent look upon her. "She is worse. Don't let me hear you say again that she is better. She is dying."

With these words he left the room. Kitty leaned back in her chair, for she was seized with a fit of trembling that made her unable to rise or speak. Something in the tone of Hugo's speech had frightened her. She was unreasonably suspicious, perhaps, but she had developed a great fear of Hugo's evil designs. He had shown her plainly enough that he had no principle, no conscience, no sense of shame. And she feared for Mrs. Luttrell.

Her fears did not go very far. She thought that Hugo was

capable of sending away the nurse, or of depriving Mrs. Luttrell of care and comfort to such an extent as to shorten her life. She could not suspect Hugo of an intention to commit actual, flagrant crime. Yet some undefined terror of him had made her beg Vivian to tell Brian and his wife to come home as soon as possible. She did not know what might happen. She was afraid; and at any rate she wanted to secure her husband against temptation. He might thank her for it afterwards, perhaps, though Kitty did not think that he ever would.

She went upstairs after dinner to sit with Mrs. Luttrell, as she usually did at that hour. The poor woman was perceptibly better. The look of recognition in her eyes was not so painfully beseeching as it had been hitherto; the hand which Kitty took in hers gently returned her pressure. She muttered the only word that her lips seemed able to speak:—"Brian! Brian!"

"He is coming," said Kitty, bending her head so that her lips almost touched the withered cheek. "He is coming—coming soon."

A wonderful light of satisfaction stole into the melancholy eyes. Again she pressed Kitty's hand. She was content.

The nurse generally returned to Mrs. Luttrell's room after her supper; and Kitty waited for some time, wondering why she was so long in coming. She rang the bell at last and enquired for her. The maid replied that Mrs. Samson, the nurse, had been taken ill and had gone to bed. Kitty then asked for the housekeeper, and the maid went away to summon her.

Again Kitty waited; but no housekeeper came.

She was about to ring the bell a second time, when her husband entered the room. "What do you want with the housekeeper at this time of night?" he asked, carelessly.

Kitty explained. Hugo raised his eyebrows. "Oh, is that all?" he said. "Really, Kitty, you make too much fuss about my aunt. She will do well enough. I won't have poor old Shairp called up from her bed to sit here till morning."

"But somebody must stay," said Kitty, whom her husband had drawn into the little dressing-room. "Mrs. Luttrell must not be left alone."

"She shall not be left alone, my dear; I'll take care of that. I have seen Samson, hearing that she was ill, and find that it is only a fit of sickness, which is passing off. She will be here in half-an-hour; or, if not, Shairp can be called."

"Then I will stay here until one of them comes," said Kitty.

"You will do nothing of the kind. You will go to bed at once. It is ten o'clock, and I don't want you to spoil that charming complexion of yours by late hours." He spoke with a sort of

sneer, but immediately passed his finger down her delicate cheek with a tenderly caressing gesture, as if to make up for the previous hardness of his tone. Kitty shrank away from him, but he only smiled and continued softly: "Those pretty eyes must not be dimmed by want of sleep. Go to bed, *ma belle*, and dream of me."

"Let me stay for a little while," entreated Kitty. "If Mrs. Samson comes in half-an-hour I shall not be tired. Just till then, Hugo."

"Not at all, my little darling." His tone was growing quite playful, and he even imprinted a light kiss upon her cheek as he went on. "I will wait here myself until Samson comes, and if she is not better I will summon Mrs. Shairp. Will that not satisfy you?"

"Why should you stay?" said Kitty, in a whisper. A look of dread had come into her eyes.

"Why should I not?" smiled Hugo. "Aunt Margaret likes to have me with her, and she is not likely to want anything just now. Run away, my fair Kitty. I will call you if I really need help."

What did Kitty suspect? She turned white and suddenly put her arms round her husband's neck, bringing his beautiful dark face down to her own.

"Let me stay," she murmured in his ear. "I am afraid. I don't know exactly what I am afraid of; but I want to stay. I can't leave her to-night."

He put her away from him almost roughly. A sinister look crossed his face.

"You are a little fool: you always were," he said, fiercely. Then he tried to regain the old smoothness of tongue which so seldom failed him; but this time he found it difficult. "You are nervous," he said. "You have been sitting in a sick-room too long: I must not let you over-tire yourself. You will be better when we leave Netherglen. Go and dream of blue skies and sunny shores: we will see my native land together, Kitty, and forget this desert of a place. There, go now. I will take care of Aunt Margaret."

He put her out at the door, still with the silky, caressing manner that she distrusted, still with the false smile stereotyped upon his face. Then he went back into the dressing-room and closed the door.

Kitty went to her own room, and changed her evening dress for a dressing-gown of soft, dark red cashmere which did not rustle as she moved. She was resolved against going to bed, at any rate until Hugo had left Mrs. Luttrell's room. She sat down and waited.

The clock struck eleven. She could bear the suspense no longer. She went out into the passage and listened at the door of Mrs. Luttrell's room. Not a sound: not a movement to be heard.

She stole away to the room which the nurse occupied. Mrs. Samson was lying on her bed, breathing heavily: she seemed to be in a sound sleep. Kitty shook her by the arm; but the woman only moaned and moved uneasily, then snored more stertorously than before. The thought crossed Kitty's mind that, perhaps, Hugo had not wanted Mrs. Samson to be awake.

She made up her mind to go to the housekeeper's room. It was situated in that wing of the house which Kitty had once learnt to know only too well. For some reason or other Hugo had insisted lately upon the servants taking up their sleeping quarters in this wing; and although Mrs. Shairp, who had returned to Netherglen upon his marriage, protested that it was very inconvenient—"because no sound from the other side of the house could reach their ears"—(how well Kitty remembered her saying this!) yet even she had been obliged to give way to Hugo's will.

Kitty went to the door that communicated with the wing. She turned the handle: it would not open. She shook it, and even knocked, but she dared not make much noise. It was not a door that could be fastened or unfastened from inside. Someone in the main part of the house, therefore, must necessarily have turned the key and taken it away. One thing was evident: the servants had been locked into their own rooms, and it was quite impossible for Mrs. Shairp to come to her mistress's room, unless the person who fastened the door came and unfastened it again.

"I wonder that he did not lock me in," said Kitty to herself, wringing her little hands as she came hopelessly down the great staircase into the hall, and then up again to her own room. She had no doubt but that it was Hugo who had done this thing for some end of his own. "What does he mean? What is it that he does not want us to know?"

She reached her own room as she asked this question of herself. The door resisted her hand as the door of the servants' wing had done. It was locked, too. Hugo—or someone else—had turned the key, thinking that she was safe in her own room, and wishing to keep her a prisoner until morning.

Kitty's blood ran cold. Something was wrong: some dark intention must be in Hugo's mind, or he would not have planned so carefully to keep the household out of Mrs. Luttrell's room. She remembered that she had seen a light in a bed-room near Hugo's own—the room where Stevens usually slept. Should she rouse him and ask for his assistance? No: she knew that this man was a mere tool of Hugo's: she could not trust him to help

her against her husband's will. There was nothing for it but to do what she could without help from anyone. She would be brave for Mrs. Luttrell's sake, although she had not been brave for her own.

Oh, why had she not made her warning to Vivian a little stronger? Why had Brian Luttrell not come home that night to Nethergien? It was too late to expect him now.

Her heart beat fast and her hands trembled, but she went resolutely enough to the dressing-room from which Hugo had done his best to exclude her. The door was slightly ajar: oh wonderful good fortune! and the fire was out. The room was in darkness; and the door leading into Mrs. Luttrell's apartment stood open—she had a full view of its warmly lighted space.

She remained motionless for a few minutes: then seeing her opportunity, she glided behind the thick curtain that screened the window. Here she could see the great white bed with its heavy hangings of crimson damask, and the head of the sick woman in its frilled cap lying on the pillows: she could see also her husband's face and figure, as he stood beside the little table on which Mrs. Luttrell's medicine bottles were usually kept, and she shivered at the sight.

His face wore its craftiest and most sinister expression. His eyes were narrowed like those of a cat about to spring: the lines of his face were set in a look of cruel malice, which Kitty had learned to know. What was he doing? He had a tumbler in one hand, and a tiny phial in the other: he was measuring out some drops of a fluid into the glass.

He set down the little bottle on the table, and held up the tumbler to the light. Then he took a carafe and poured a teaspoonful of water on the liquid. Kitty could see the phial on the table very distinctly. It bore in red letters the inscription: "Poison." And again she asked herself: what was Hugo going to do?

Breathlessly she watched. He smiled a little to himself, smelt the liquid, and held it once more towards the light, as if to judge with his narrowed eyes of the quantity required. Then, with a noiseless foot and watchful eye, he moved towards the bed, still holding the tumbler in his hand. He looked down for a moment at the pale and wrinkled face upon the pillow; then he spoke in a peculiarly smooth and ingratiating tone of voice.

"Aunt Margaret," he said, "I have brought you something to make you sleep."

He had placed the glass to her lips, when a movement in the next room made him start and lift his eyes. In another moment his wife's hands were on his arm, and her eyes were blazing into

his own. The liquor in the glass was spilt upon the bed. Hugo turned deadly pale.

"What do you mean? What do you want?" he said, with a look of mingled rage and terror. "What are you doing here?"

"I have come to save her—from you." She was not afraid, now that the words were said, now that she had seen the guilty look upon his face. She confronted him steadily; she placed herself between him and the bed. Hugo uttered a low but emphatic malediction on her "meddlesome folly."

"Why are you not in your room?" he said. "I locked you in."

"I was not there. Thank God that I was not."

"And why should you thank God?" said Hugo, who stood looking at her with an ugly expression of baffled cunning on his face. "I was doing no harm. I was giving her a sleeping-draught."

"Would she ever have waked?" asked Kitty, in a whisper.

She looked into her husband's eyes as she spoke, and she knew from that moment that the accusation was based on no idle fancy of her own. In heart, at least, he was a murderer.

But the question called forth his worst passions. He cursed her again—bitterly, blasphemously—then raised his hand and struck her with his closed fist between the eyes. He knew what he was doing: she fell to the ground, stunned and bleeding. He thrust her out of his way; she lay on the floor between the bed and the window, moaning a little, but for a time utterly unconscious of all that went on around her.

Hugo's preparations had been spoilt. He was obliged to begin them over again. But this time his nerve was shaken: he blundered a little once or twice. Kitty's low moan was in his ears: the paralysed woman upon the bed was regarding him with a look of frozen horror in her wide-open eyes. She could not move: she could not speak, but she could understand.

He turned his back upon the two, and measured out the drops once more into the glass. His hand shook as he did so. He was longer about his work than he had been before. So long that Kitty came to herself a little, and watched him with a horrible fascination. First the drops; then the water; then the sleeping-draught, from which the sleeper was not to awake, would be ready.

Kitty did not know how she found strength or courage to do at that moment what she did. It seemed to her that fear, sickness, pain, all passed away, and left her only the determination to make one desperate effort to defeat her husband's ends.

She knew that the window by which she lay was unshuttered. She rose from the ground, she reached the window-sill and threw

up the sash, almost before Hugo knew what she was doing. Then she sent forth that terrible, agonised cry for help, which reached the ears of the four men who were even at that moment waiting and listening at the garden door.

Hugo dropped the glass. It was shivered to pieces on the floor, and its contents stained the rug on which it fell. He strode to the window and stopped his wife's mouth with his hands, then dragged her away from it, and spoke some bitter furious words.

"Do you want to hang me?" he said. "Keep quiet, or I'll make you repent your night's work——"

And then he paused. He had heard the sound of opening doors, of heavy steps and strange voices upon the stairs. He turned hastily to the dressing-room, and he was confronted on the threshold by the determined face and flashing eyes of his cousin, Brian Luttrell. He cast a hurried glance beyond and around him; but he saw no help at hand. Kitty had sunk fainting to the ground: there were other faces—severe and menacing enough—behind Brian's: he felt that he was caught like a wild beast in a trap. His only course was to brazen out the matter as best he could; and this, in the face of Brian Luttrell, of Percival Heron, of old Mr. Colquhoun, it was hard to do. In spite of himself his face turned pale, and his knees shook as he spoke in a hoarse and grating tone.

"What does this disturbance mean?" he said. "Why do you come rushing into Mrs. Luttrell's room at this hour of the night?"

"Because," said Brian, taking him by the shoulder, "your wife has called for help, and we believe that she needs it. Because we know that you are one of the greatest scoundrels that ever trod the face of the earth. Because we are going to bring you to justice. That is why!"

"These are very fine accusations," said Hugo, with a pale sneer, "but I think you will find a difficulty in proving them, Mr—Vasari."

"I shall have at least no difficulty in proving that you stole money and forged my brother's name three years ago," said Brian, in a voice that was terrible in its icy scorn. "I shall have no difficulty in proving to the world's satisfaction that you shamefully cheated Dino Vasari, and that you twice—yes, twice—tried to murder him, in order to gain your own ends. Hugo Luttrell, you are a coward, a thief, a would-be murderer; and unless you can prove that you were in my mother's room with no evil intent (which I believe to be impossible) you shall be branded with all these names in the world's face."

"There is no proof—there is no legal proof," cried Hugo, boldly. But his lips were white.

"But there is plenty of moral proof, young man," said Mr. Colquhoun's dry voice. "Quite enough to blast your reputation. And what does this empty bottle mean and this broken glass? Perhaps your wife can tell us that."

There was a momentary silence. Mr. Colquhoun held up the little bottle, and pointed with raised eyebrows to the label upon it. Heron was supporting his sister in his arms and trying to revive her: Fane and the impassive constable barred the way between Hugo and the door.

In that pause, a strange, choked sound came from the bed. For the first time for many months Mrs. Luttrell had slightly raised her hand. She said the name that had been upon her lips so many times during the last few weeks, and her eyes were fixed upon the man whom for a lifetime she had called her son.

"Brian!" she said, "Brian!"

And he, suddenly turning pale, relaxed his hold upon Hugo's arm and walked to the bedside. "Mother," he said, leaning over her, "did you call me? Did you speak to me?"

She looked at him with wistful eyes: her nerveless fingers tried to press his hand. "Brian," she murmured. Then, with a great spasmodic effort: "My son!"

The attention of the others had been concentrated upon this little scene; and for the moment both Fane and Mr. Colquhoun drew nearer to the bed, leaving the door of Mrs. Luttrell's bedroom unguarded. The constable was standing in the dressing-room. It was then that Hugo saw his chance, although it was one which a sane man would scarcely have thought of taking. He made a rush for the bed-room door.

Whither should he go? The front door was bolted and barred; but he supposed that the back door would be open. He never thought of the entrance to the garden by which Brian Luttrell had got into the house. He dashed down the staircase; he was nimbler and lighter-footed than Fane, who was immediately behind him, and he knew the tortuous ways and winding passages of the house, as Fane did not. He gained on his pursuer. Down the dark stone passages he fled: the door into the back premises stood wide open. There was a flight of steep stone steps, which led straight to a kitchen and thence into the yard. He would have time to unbolt the kitchen door, even if it were not already open, for Fane was far, far behind.

But there was no light, and there was a sudden turn in the steps which he had forgotten. Fane reached the head of the staircase in time to hear a cry, a heavy crashing fall, a groan. Then all was still.

CHAPTER LI.

A LAST CONFESSION.

THEY carried him upstairs again, handling him gently, and trying to discover the extent of his injuries; but they did not guess—until, in the earliest hours of the day, a doctor came from Dunmuir to Netherglen—that Hugo Luttrell's hours on earth were numbered. He had broken his back, and although he might linger in agony for a short time, the inevitable end was near. As the dawn came creeping into the room in which he lay, he opened his eyes, and the watchers saw that he shuddered as he looked round.

"Why have they brought me here?" he said.

No one knew why. It was the nearest and most convenient room for the purpose. Brian had not been by to interpose, or he might have chosen another place. For it was the room to which Richard Luttrell had been carried when they brought him back to Netherglen.

Kitty was beside him, and, with her, Elizabeth, who had come from Dunmuir on hearing of the accident. These two women, knowing as they did the many evil deeds which he had committed, did not refuse him their gentle ministry. When they saw the pain that he suffered, their hearts bled for him. They could not love him: they could not forgive him for all that he had done; but they pitied him. And most of all they pitied him when they knew that the fiat had gone forth that he must die.

He knew it, too. He knew it from their faces: he had no need to ask. The hopelessness upon his face, the pathetic look of suffering in his eyes, touched even Kitty's heart. She asked him once if she could do anything to help him. They were alone together, and the answer was as unexpected as it was brief: "I want Angela."

They telegraphed for her, although they hardly thought that she would reach the house before he died. But the fact that she was coming seemed to buoy him up: he lingered throughout the day, turning his eyes from time to time to the clock upon the mantelpiece, or towards the opening door. At night he grew restless and uneasy: he murmured piteously that she would not come, or that he should die before she came.

Brian, although in the house, held aloof from the injured man's room. Merciful as he was by nature, Hugo's offences had transcended the bounds even of his tolerance; and his anger was more implacable than that of a harsher man. Although he had been told that Hugo was dying, he found it hard to be pitiful. He

knew more than Hugo imagined. Mrs. Luttrell had recovered speech sufficiently to tell her son the history of the previous night, and Brian was certain that Kitty's cry for help had come only just in time.

It was early in the evening when Hugo spoke, almost for the first time of his own accord, to his wife. "Kitty," he said, imperiously, "come here."

She came, trembling a little, and stood beside him, scarcely bearing to meet the gaze of those darkly-burning eyes.

"Kitty," he said, looking at her strangely, "I suppose you hate me."

"No," she answered. "No, indeed, Hugo."

"Is that mark on your forehead from the blow I gave you?"

"Yes."

"I did not mean to hurt you," he said, "but I think I was mad just then. However, it doesn't matter; I am going to die, and you can be happy in your own way. I suppose you will marry Vivian?"

"Don't talk so, Hugo," she said, laying her hand upon his brow.

"Why not? I do not care. Better to die than lie here—here, where Richard Luttrell lay. Kitty, they say I cannot be moved while I live; but if—if you believe that I ever loved you, see that they carry me out of this room as soon as I am dead. Promise me that."

"I promise."

"That is all I want. Marry Vivian, and forget me as soon as you please. He will never love you as much as I did, Kitty. If I had lived, you would have loved me, too, in time. But it's no use now."

The voice was faint, but sullen. Kitty's heart yearned over him.

"Oh, Hugo," she said, "won't you think of other things? Ask God to forgive you for what you have done: He will forgive you if you repent: He will, indeed."

"Don't talk to me of forgiveness," said Hugo, closing his eyes. "No one forgives: God least of all."

"We forgive you, Hugo," said Kitty, with brimming eyes, "and is God less merciful than ourselves?"

"I will wait till Angela comes," he answered. "I will listen to her. To nobody but her."

And then he relapsed into a half-conscious state, from which she dared not arouse him.

Angela came at night; and she was led almost instantly to the room in which he lay. He opened his eyes as soon as she entered, and fixed them eagerly upon her.

"So you have come," he said. There was a touch of satisfaction in his tone. She knelt down beside him and took his hand. "Talk to me," he murmured.

Kitty and Brian, who had entered with Angela, marvelled at the request. They marvelled more when she complied with it in a curiously undoubting way. It seemed as if she understood his needs, his peculiarities, even his sins, exactly. She spoke of the holiest things in a simple, direct way, which evidently appealed to something within him; for, though he did not respond, he lay with his eyes fixed upon her face, and gave no sign of discontent.

At last he sighed, and bade her stop.

"It's all wrong," he said, wearily. "I had forgotten. I ought to have a priest."

"There is one waiting downstairs," said Brian.

Hugo started at the voice.

"So you are there?" he said. "Oh, it's no use. No priest would absolve me until—until——"

"Yes: until what?" said Angela. But he made no answer.

Presently, however, he pressed her hand, and murmured:—

"You were always good to me."

"Dear Hugo!"

"And I loved you—a little—not in the way I loved Kitty—but as a saint—an angel. Do you think you could forgive me if I had wronged you!"

"Yes, dear, I believe so."

"If you forgive me, I shall think that there is some hope. But I don't know. Brian is there still, is he not? I have something to say to him."

Brian came forward, a little reluctantly. Hugo looked at him with those melancholy, sunken eyes, in which a sort of fire seemed to smoulder still.

"Brian will never forgive me," he said.

"Yes, Hugo, he will," said Angela.

Brian gave an inarticulate murmur, whether of assent or dissent they could not tell. But he did not look at Hugo's face.

"I know," said Hugo. "It doesn't matter. I don't care. I was justified in what I did."

"You hear," said Brian to Angela, in a very low voice.

But Hugo went on without noticing.

"Justified—except in one thing. And I want to tell you about that."

"You need not," said Brian, quietly. "If it is anything fresh, I do not wish to hear."

"Brian," said Angela, "you are hard."

"No, he is not hard," Hugo interposed, in a dreamy voice, more as if he were talking to himself than to them. "He was always good to me: he did more for me than anybody else. More than Richard. I always hated Richard. I wished that he was dead." He stopped, and then resumed, with a firmer intonation. "Is Mr. Colquhoun in the house? Fetch him here, and Vivian too, if he is at hand. I have something to say to them."

They did his bidding, and presently the persons for whom he asked stood at his bedside.

"Are they all here? My eyes are getting dim; it is time I spoke," said Hugo, feebly. "Mr. Colquhoun, I shall want you to take down what I say. You may make it as public as you like. Angela——"

He felt for her hand. She gave it to him, and let him lean upon her shoulder as he spoke. He looked up in her eyes with a sort of smile.

"Kiss me, Angela," he said, "for the last time. You will never do it again. . . Are you all listening? I wish you and everyone to know that it was I—I—who shot Richard Luttrell in the wood; not Brian. We fired at the same moment. It was not Brian; do you hear?"

There was a dead silence. Then Brian staggered as if he would have fallen, and caught at Percival's arm. But the weakness was only for a moment. He said, simply, "I thank God," and stood erect again. Mr. Colquhoun put on his spectacles and stared at him. Angela, pale to the lips, did not move; Hugo's head was still resting against her shoulder. It was Brian's voice that broke the silence, and there was pity and kindliness in its tone.

"Never mind, Hugo," he said, bending over him. "It was an accident; it might have been done by either of us. God knows I sorrowed bitterly when I thought my hand had done it; perhaps you have sorrowed, too. At any rate, you are trying to make amends, and if I have anything personally to forgive—"

"Wait," said Hugo, in his feeble yet imperious voice, with long pauses between the brief, broken sentences. "You do not understand. I did it on purpose. I meant to kill him. He had struck me, and I meant to be revenged. I thought I should suffer for it—and I did not care. . . I did not mean Brian to be blamed; but I dared not tell the truth. . . Put me down, Angela; I killed him, do you hear?"

But she did not move.

"Did you wish me to write this statement?" said Mr. Colquhoun, in his dryest manner. "If so, I have done it."

"Give me the pen," said Hugo, when he had heard what had been written.

He took it between his feeble fingers. He could scarcely write; but he managed to scrawl his name at the bottom of the paper on which his confession was recorded, and two of the persons present signed their names as witnesses.

"Tell Mrs. Luttrell," said Hugo, very faintly, when this was over. Then he lay back, closed his eyes, and remained for some time without speaking.

"I have something else to tell," he said, at last. "Kitty—you know, she married me . . but it was against her own will. She did not elope with me. I carried her off. . . She will explain it all now. Do you hear, Kitty? Tell anything you like. It will not hurt me. You never loved me, and you never would have done. But nobody will ever love you as I did; remember that. And I think that's all."

"Have you nothing to say," asked Mr. Colquhoun in very solemn tones, "about your conduct to Dino Vasari and Mrs. Luttrell?"

"Nothing to you."

"But everything to God," murmured Angela. He raised his eyes to her face and did not speak. "Pray for His forgiveness, Hugo, and He will grant it. Even if your sins are as scarlet they shall be as white as snow."

"I want your forgiveness," he whispered, "and nothing more."

"I will give you mine," she said, and the tears fell from her eyes as she spoke; and Brian will give you his: yes, Brian, yes. As we hope ourselves to be forgiven, Hugo, we forgive you; and we will pray with you for God's forgiveness, too."

She had taken Brian's hand and laid it upon Hugo's, and for a moment the three hands rested together in one strangely loving clasp. And then Hugo whispered, "Pray for me if you like: I – I dare not pray."

And, forgetful of any human presence but that of this sick, sinful soul about to come before its Maker, Angela prayed aloud.

. . . . . .

He died in the early dawn, with his hand still clasped in hers. The short madness of his love for Kitty seemed to have faded from his memory. Perhaps all earthly things had grown rather faint to him: certain it was that his attempt on the lives of Dino and of Mrs. Luttrell did not seem to weigh very heavily on his conscience. It was the thought of Richard Luttrell that haunted him more than all beside. It was with a long, shuddering moan of fear—and, as Angela hoped (but only faintly hoped), of penitence—that his soul went out into the darkness of eternity.

. . . . . .

With Hugo Luttrell's death, the troubles of the family at Netherglen seemed to disappear. Old Mrs. Luttrell's powers of speech remained with her, although she could not use her limbs; and the hardness and stubbornness of her character had undergone a marvellous change. She wept when she heard of Dino's death; but her affection for Brian, and also for Elizabeth, proved to be strong and unwavering. Her great desire—that the properties of Netherglen and Strathleckie should be united—was realised in a way of which she had never dreamt. Brian himself believed firmly that he was of Italian parentage and that Dino Vasari was the veritable heir of the Luttrells; but the notion was now so painful to Mrs. Luttrell, that he never spoke of it, and agreed, as he said to Elizabeth, to be recognised as the master of Netherglen and Strathleckie under false pretences. "For the whole estate, to tell the truth, is yours, not mine," he said. And she: "What does that matter, since we are man and wife? There is no 'mine and thine' in the case. It is all yours and all mine; for we are one."

In fact, no words were more applicable to Brian and Elizabeth than the quaint lines of the old poet:

> "They were so one, it never could be said
> Which of them ruled and which of them obeyed.
> He ruled because she would obey; and she,
> By her obeying, ruled as well as he.
> There ne'er was known between them a dispute
> Save which the other's will should execute."

The Herons returned to London shortly after Elizabeth's marriage, and with them Kitty returned, too. But it was a very different Kitty from the one who had frolicked at Strathleckie, or pined at Netherglen. The widowed Mrs. Hugo Luttrell was a gentler, perhaps a sadder, woman than Kitty Heron had promised to be: but she was a sweeter woman, and one who formed the chief support and comfort to her father's large and irregular household, as it passed from its home in Scotland to a more permanent abode in Kensington. For the house in Gower-street, dear as it was to Kitty's heart, was not the one which Mr. and Mrs. Heron preferred to any other.

Little Jack, now slowly recovering from his affection of the spine, found in Kitty the motherliness which he had sorely missed when Elizabeth first went away. His affection was very sweet to Kitty. She had never hitherto been more than a playmate to her stepbrothers: she was destined henceforward to be their chief counsellor and friend. And the little baby-sister was almost as a child of her own to Kitty's heart.

It was not until more than a year of quiet life in her father's

home had passed away that she saw much of Rupert Vivian. She was very shy and silent with him when he began to seek her out again. He thought her a little cold, and fancied that a blind man could find no favour in her eyes. It was Angela—that universal peacemaker—who at last set matters straight between the two.

"Kitty," she said, one day when Kitty was calling upon her, "why are you so distant and unfriendly to my brother?"

"I did not mean to be," said Kitty, with rising colour.

"But, indeed, you are. And he thinks—he thinks—that he has offended you."

"Oh, no! How could he?" ejaculated Kitty. Whereat Angela smiled. "You must tell him not to think any such thing, Angela, please."

"You must tell him yourself. He might not believe me," said Angela.

Kitty was very simple in some things still. She took Angela's advice literally.

"Shall I tell him now—to-day?" she said, seriously.

"Yes, now, to-day," said Angela. "You will find him in the library."

"But he will think it so strange if I go to him there.

"Not at all. I would not send you to him if I did not know what he would feel. Kitty, he is not happy. Can you not make him a little happier?"

And then Angela, who had meanwhile led her guest to the library door, opened it and made her enter, almost against her will. She stood for a moment inside the door, doubting whether to go or stay. Then she looked at Rupert, and decided that she would stay.

He was alone. He was leaning his head on one hand in an attitude of listlessness, which showed that he was out of spirits.

"Is that you, Angela?" he said.

"No," said Kitty, softly. "It's not Angela: it's me."

She was very ungrammatical, but her tone was sweet, and Rupert smiled. His face looked as if the sunshine had fallen on it.

"Me, is it?" he said, half-rising. Then, more gravely—"I am very glad to see you—no, not to see you: that's not it, is it?—to have you here."

"Are you?" said Kitty.

There were tears in her voice.

"Am I not?" He was holding her hand now, and she did not draw it away even when he raised it, somewhat hesitatingly, to his lips. He went on in a very low voice:—"It would make the

happiness of my life to have you always with me. But I must not hope for that."

"Why not?" said Kitty, giving him both hands instead of one; "when it would make mine, too."

And after that there was no more to be said.

"Tell me," she whispered, a little later, "am I at all now like the little girl in Gower-street that you used to know?"

"Not a bit," he answered, kissing her. "You are dearer, sweeter, lovelier than any little girl in Gower-street or anywhere else in the whole wide world."

"And you forgive me for my foolishness?"

"My darling," he said, "your foolishness was nothing to my own. And if you can bear to tie yourself to a blind man, so many years older than yourself, who has proved himself the most arrogant and conceited fool alive——"

"Hush!" said Kitty. "I shall not allow you to speak in that way—of the man I love."

"Kiss me, then, for the first time in your life, Kitty, and I will say no more."

And so they married and went down to Vivian Court in Devonshire, where they live and flourish still, the happiest of the happy. Never more happy than when Brian and Elizabeth came to spend a week with them, bringing a pair of sturdy boys—Bernard and Richard they are called—to play with Kitty's little girl upon the velvet lawns and stately terraces of Vivian Court. Kitty is already making plans for the future union of Bernard Luttrell and her own little Angela; but her husband shakes his head, and laughingly tells her that planned marriages never come to good.

"I thought all marriages had to be planned," says Kitty, innocently.

"Mine was not."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I was led into it—quite against my will, madam—by a tricksy, wilful sprite, who would have her own way——"

"Say that you have not repented it, Rupert," she whispers, looking up at him with the fond, sorrowful eyes that he cannot see.

"My own love," he answers, taking her in his arms and kissing her, "you make the sunshine of my life; and as long as you are near me I am thoroughly and unspeakably content."

Kitty knows that it is true, although she weeps sometimes in secret at the thought that he will never look upon his little daughter's face. But everyone says that the tiny Angela is the image of Kitty herself as a child; and, therefore, when the mother

wishes to describe the winning face and dancing eyes, she tells Rupert that he has only to picture to himself once more—"the little girl that he used to know in Gower Street."

CHAPTER LII.

"THE END CROWNS ALL, AND THAT IS YET TO COME."

AND what of Angela Vivian, the elder? Angela, whose heart was said to be buried in a grave?

After Hugo Luttrell's death, she remained for some time at Netherglen, sitting a great deal in Mrs. Luttrell's room and trying to resume the daughter-like ways which had grown so natural to her. But she was driven slowly to perceive that she was by no means necessary to Mrs. Luttrell's happiness. Mrs. Luttrell loved her still, but her heart had gone out vehemently to Brian and Elizabeth; and when either of them was within call she wanted nothing else. Brian and Elizabeth would gladly have kept Angela with them for evermore, but it seemed to her that her duty lay now rather with her brother than with those who were, after all, of no kith or kin to her. She returned, therefore, to Rupert's house in Kensington, and lived there until his marriage took place.

She was sorry for one thing—that the friendship between herself and Percival Heron seemed to be broken. The words which she had spoken to him before Hugo's death had evidently made a very strong impression upon Percival's mind. He looked guilty and uncomfortable when he spoke to her; his manner became unusually abrupt, and at last she noticed that, if she happened to come into a room which he occupied, he immediately made an excuse for leaving it. She had very few opportunities of seeing him at all; but every time she met him, his avoidance of her became so marked that she was hurt and grieved by it. But she could not do anything to mend matters; and so she waited and was silent.

She heard, on her return to Kensington, that he had been a great deal to her brother's house, and had done much for Rupert's comfort. But as soon as he knew that she intended to stay in London he began to discontinue his visits. It was very evident that he had determined to see as little of her as possible. And, by-and-bye, he never came at all. For full three months before Kitty's engagement to Rupert Percival did not appear at the pleasant house in Kensington.

Angela was sitting alone, however, one day when he was announced. He came in, glanced round with a vexed and irritated air, and made some sort of apology.

"I came to see Rupert. I thought that you were away," he said.

"And, therefore, you came?" she said, with a little smile. "It was very good of you to come when you thought he would be lonely."

"I did not mean that exactly."

"No? I wish you would come to see him a little oftener, Mr. Heron; he misses your visits very much."

"He won't miss them long, he will soon get used to doing without me."

"But why should he?"

"Because I am going away."

"Where are you going?" said Angela, turning to look at him.

"To California," he answered, grimly.

She paused for a moment, and then said in a tranquil tone, "Oh, no."

"No? Why not?" said Percival, smiling a little in spite of himself.

"I think that if you go you will be back again in six months."

"Ah? You think I have no constancy in me; no resolution; no manliness."

"Indeed, I think nothing so dreadful. But California is not the place where I can imagine a man of your tastes being happy. Were you so very happy on the Rocas Reef?"

"That has nothing to do with it. I should have been happy if I had had enough to do. I want some active work."

"Can you not find that in England?"

"I daresay I might. I hate England. I have nothing to keep me in England."

"But what has happened?" asked Angela. "You did not talk in this way when you came from the Rocas Reef."

"Because I did not know what a fool I could make of myself."

She glanced at him with a faint, sweet smile. "You alarm me, Mr. Heron," she said, very tranquilly. "What have you been doing?"

Percival started up from the low seat in which he had placed himself, walked to the window, and then came back to her side and looked at her. He was standing in one of his most defiant attitudes, with his hands thrust into his pockets, and a deep dent on his brow.

"I will tell you what I have been doing," he said, in a curiously dogged tone. "I'll give you my history for the last year or two. It isn't a creditable one. Will you listen to it or not?"

"I will listen to it," said Angela.

She looked at him with serene, meditative eyes, which calmed him almost against his will as he proceeded.

"I'll tell you, then," he said. "I nearly wrecked three lives through my own selfish obstinacy. I almost broke a woman's heart and sacrificed my honour——"

"Almost? Nearly?" said Angela, gently. "That is possible, but you saw your mistake in time. You drew back; you did not do these things."

"I'll tell you what I did do!" he exclaimed. "I whined to you, until I loathe myself, about a woman who never cared a straw for me. Do you call that manly?"

"I call it very natural," said Angela.

"And after all——"

"Yes, after all?" He hesitated so long that she looked up into his face and gently repeated the words "After all?"

"After all," he went on at last, with a sort of groan, "I love—someone else."

They were both silent. He threw himself into a chair, and looked at her expectantly.

"Don't you despise me?" he said, presently.

"Why should I, Mr. Heron?"

"Why? Because you are so constant, so changeless, that you cannot be expected to sympathise with a man who loves a second time," cried Percival, in an exasperated tone. "And yet this love is as sunlight to candlelight, as wine to water! But you will never understand that, you, with your heart given to one man—buried in a grave."

He stopped short; she had half-risen, and made a gesture as if she would have bidden him be silent.

"There!" he said, vehemently. "I am doing it again. I am hurting you, grieving you, as I did once before, when I forgot your great sorrow; and you did right to reprove me then. I know you have hated me ever since. I know you cannot forgive me for the pain I inflicted. It's, of course, of no use to say I am sorry; that is an utterly futile thing to do; but as far as any such feeble reparation is in my power, I am quite prepared to offer it to you. Sorry? I have cursed myself and my own folly ever since."

"You are making a mistake, Mr. Heron," said Angela. She felt as if she could say nothing more.

"How am I making a mistake?" he asked.

"At the time you refer to," she said, in a hurried yet stumbling sort of way, "when you said what you did, I thought it careless, inconsiderate of you; but I have not remembered it in the way that you seem to think; I have not been angry. I have not

hated you. There is no need for you to tell me that you are sorry."

"I think there is every need," he said. "Do you suppose that I am going away into the Western wilds without even an apology?"

"It is needless," she murmured.

There was a pause, and then he leaned forward and said in a deeper tone:—

"You would not say that it was needless if you felt now as you did just then."

She looked at him helplessly, but did not speak.

"It is three years since he died. I don't ask you to forget him, only I ask whether you could not love someone else — as well?"

"Oh, Mr. Heron, don't ask me," she said, tremblingly. And then she covered her face with her hands; her cheeks were crimson.

"I will ask nothing," said Percival. "I will only tell you what my feelings have been, and then I will go away. It's a selfish indulgence, I know; but I beg of you to grant it. When I had spoken those inconsiderate words of mine I was ashamed of myself. I saw how much I had grieved you, and I vowed that I would never come into your presence again. I went away, and I kept away. You have seen for yourself how I have tried to avoid you, have you not?"

"Yes," she said, gently. "I have seen it."

"You know the reason now. I could not bear to see you and feel what you must be thinking of me. And then—then—I found that it was misery to be without you. I found that I missed you inexpressibly. I did not know till then how dear you had grown to me."

She did not move, she did not speak, she only sat and listened, with her eyes fixed upon her folded hands. But there was nothing forbidding in her silence. He felt that he might go on.

"It comes to this with me," he said, "that I cannot bear to meet you as I meet an ordinary friend or acquaintance. I would rather know that I shall never see you again. Either you must be all to me—or nothing. I know that it must be nothing, and so—I am going to California."

"Do not go," she said, without looking up. She spoke coldly, he thought, but sweetly, too.

"I must," he answered. "I must—in spite of the joy that it is to me to be even in your presence, and to hear your voice—I must go. I cannot bear it. I love you too well. It is a greater pain

than I can bear, to look at you and to know that I can bring you no comfort, no solace; that your heart is buried with Richard Luttrell in a grave."

"You are mistaken," she said again. Then, in a faltering voice, "you can bring me comfort. I shall be sorry if you are away."

He caught his breath. "Do you mean it, Angela?" he cried, eagerly. "Think what you are saying, do not tell me to stay unless—unless—you can give me a little hope. Is it possible that you do not forbid me to love you? Do you think that in time—in time—I might win your love?"

"Not in time," she murmured, "but now—now."

He could hardly believe his ears. He knelt down beside her, and took her hands in his. "Now, Angela?" he said. "Can you love me now? Oh, my love, my love! tell me the truth! Have you forgiven me?"

Her eyes were swimming in tears, but she gave him a glance of so much tenderness and trust, that he never again doubted her entire forgiveness. She might never forget Richard Luttrell, but her heart, with all its wealth of love, was given to the man who knelt before her, not buried in a grave.

. . . . . .

Of course he did not go to California. The project was an utterly unsuitable one, and nobody scouted it more disdainfully than did he as soon as the mood of discontent was past. If a crowning touch were needed to the happiness of Brian and Elizabeth, it was given by this marriage. The sting of remorse which had troubled them at times when they looked at Percival's gloomy face was quite withdrawn. Percival's face was seldom gloomy now. Angela seemed to have found the secret of soothing his irritable nerves, of calming his impatience. Her sweet serenity was never ruffled by his violence; and for her sake he learned to subdue his temper, and to smooth his tongue as well as his brow. She led the lion in a leash of silk, and he was actually proud to be so led.

They took a house in the unfashionable precincts of Russell-square, where Percival could be near his work. They were not rich, by any manner of means; but they were able to live in a very comfortable fashion, and soon found themselves surrounded by a circle of friends, who were quite as much attracted by Angela's tranquil grace and tenderness as by Percival's fitful brilliancy. Percival would never be very popular; but it was soon admitted on every hand that his intellect had seldom been so clear, his insight so great, nor his wit so free from bitterness, as in the days that succeeded his marriage with Angela. There

is every reason to suppose that he will yet be a thoroughly prosperous and successful man.

The one drop of bitterness in their cup is the absence of children. No little feet have come to patter up and down the wide staircase of that roomy house in Russell-square, no little voices re-echo along the passages and in the lofty rooms. But Angela's heart is perhaps only the more ready to bestow its tenderness upon the many who come to her for help—the weak, the sickly, the sinful and the weary, for whom she spends herself and is not spent in vain.

. . . . . .

Little more than two years after Brian's marriage, Mrs. Luttrell died. She died with her hand fast clasped in that of the man who had been indeed a son to her, she died with his name upon her lips. And when she was laid to rest beside her husband and her eldest son, Brian and Elizabeth were free to carry out a project which had been for some time very near their hearts. They went together to San Stefano.

It was then that Elizabeth first heard the whole story of her husband's sojourn at the monastery. She had never known more than the bare facts before; and she listened with a new comprehension of his character, as he told her of the days of listless anguish spent after his illness at San Stefano, and of the hopelessness from which her own words and looks aroused him. He spoke much, also, of Dino and of Padre Cristoforo and the kindly monks: and in the sunny stillness of an early Italian morning they went to the churchyard to look for Dino's grave.

They would not have found it but for the help of a monk who chanced to be in the neighbourhood. He led them courteously to the spot. It was unmarked by any stone, but a wreath of flowers had been laid upon it that morning, and the grassy mound showed signs of constant care. Brian and Elizabeth stood silently beside it; they did not move until the monk addressed them. And then Brian saw that Father Cristoforo was standing at their side.

"He sleeps well," he said. "You need not mourn for him."

"Yes, he sleeps," answered Brian, a little bitterly. "But we have lost him."

"Do I not know that as well as you? Do I not grieve for him?" said the old man, with a deep sigh. "I have more reason to grieve than you. I have never yet told you how he died. Come with me and I will let you hear."

They followed him to the guest-room of the monastery, and there, whilst they waited for him to speak, he threw back his cowl and fixed his eyes on Elizabeth's fair face.

"It was for your sake," he said, "for your sake, in part, that Dino left his duty to the Church undone. It was your face, signora, that came, as he told me, between him and his prayers. I am glad that I have seen you before I die."

He spoke mournfully, yet meditatively—more as if he was talking to himself than to her. Elizabeth shrank back a little, and Brian uttered a quick exclamation.

"Her face?" he said. "Father, what does this mean?"

The monk gave a start, and seemed to rouse himself from a dream.

"Pardon me," he said, gently; "I am growing an old man, and I have had much to bear. I spoke without thought. Let me tell you the story of Dino's death."

As far as he knew it, as far as he guessed it, he told the story. And when Brian uttered some strong ejaculation of anger and grief at its details, Father Cristoforo bowed his head upon his breast, folded his hands, and sighed.

"I was wrong," he said. "You do well to rebuke me, my son; for I was wrong."

"You were hard, you were cruel," said Brian, vehemently.

"Yes, I was hard; I was cruel. But I am punished. The light of my eyes has been taken from me. I have lost the son that I loved."

"You will see him again," said Elizabeth, softly. "You will go to him some day."

"The saints grant it. I fear that I may not be worthy. To him the high places will be given; to me—to me—— But he will pray for me."

Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears as she looked at him. The old man's form was bent; his face was shrunken, his eyes were dim. As she rightly guessed, it was the sorrow of Dino's death that had aged him in this way.

Brian spoke next.

"Tell me," he said, "tell me for the last time, father, what you believe to have been the truth of the story. Did Vincenza change the children, or did she not?"

"My son," said the old monk, "a few months—nay, a few weeks ago, I said to myself that I would never answer that question. But life is slipping away from me; and I cannot leave the world with even the shadow of a lie upon my lips. When I sent Dino to England, I believed that Vincenza had done this thing. When Dino returned to us, I still believed that he was Mrs. Luttrell's son. But since our Dino's death, I have had a message—a solemn message—from the persons who saw Vincenza die. She had charged them with her last breath to tell

me that the story was false—that the children were never changed at all. It was Mrs. Luttrell's delusion that suggested the plan to her. She hoped that she might make money by declaring that you were her son, and Dino, Mrs. Luttrell's. She swore on her deathbed that Dino was her child, and that it was Lippo Vasari who was buried in the churchyard of San Stefano."

"Which story are we to believe?" said Brian, almost doubtingly.

"The evidence is pretty evenly balanced," replied the Prior. "Believe the one that suits you best."

Brian did not answer; he stood for a moment with his head bent and his eyes fixed on the ground. "To think," he said at last, "of the misery that we have suffered through—a lie!" Then he looked up, and met Elizabeth's eyes. "You are right," he said, as if answering some unspoken comment, "I have no reason to complain. I found Dino—and I found you; a friend and a wife—I thank God for them both."

He took her hand in his, and his face was lit up with the look of love that was henceforth, as hitherto, to make the happiness of his life and hers.

And when they went forth from the monastery doors it seemed to them a good omen that the last words echoing in their ears were those of the old monk's farewell salutation:—

"Go in peace!"

THE END.

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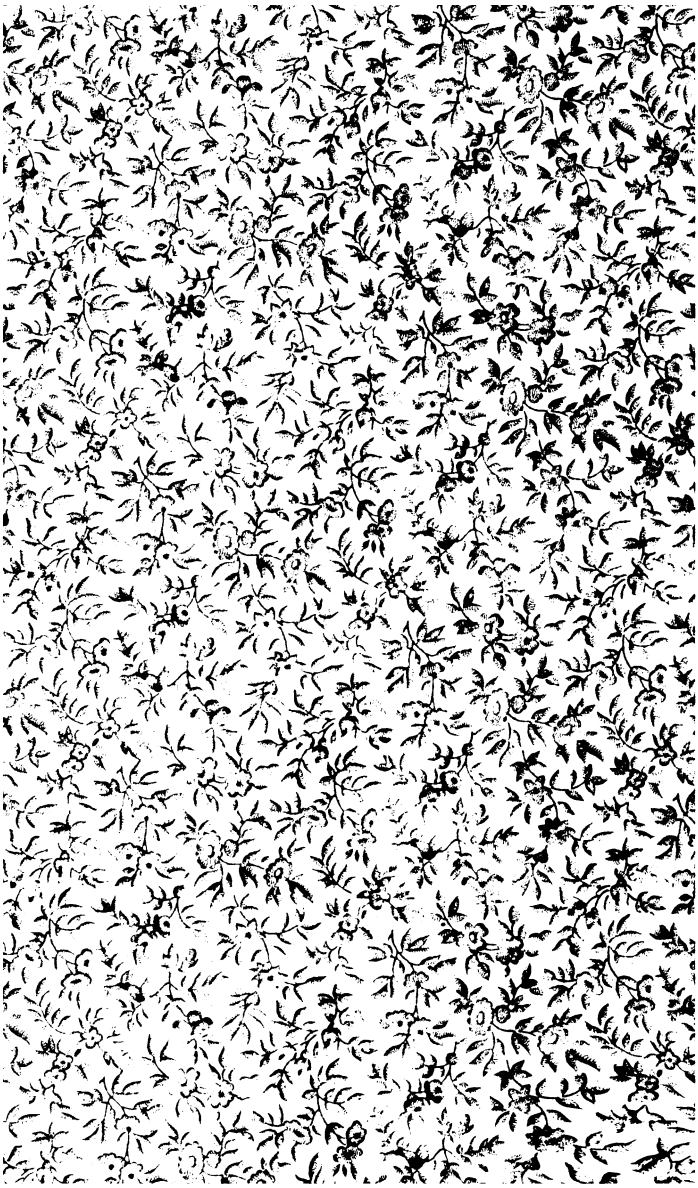
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